Chaos Barren

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Sonic the Hedgehog, Amy Rose (Sonic the Hedgehog), Knuckles the Echidna, Miles "Tails" Prower, Maddie Wachowski, Tom Wachowski, Silver the Hedgehog, Shadow the Hedgehog, Dr. Eggman | Dr. Robotnik, Tikal the Echidna

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Chaos Barren

by but_why_not

Summary

A freak accident from an energy control gone wrong brings four Sonics together. Delighted, the hedgehogs make the most of it, unaware that tampering with unknown energies can have dire consequences.
In a race against time, they have to come together to save one of their own, unraveling the mystery behind a world devoid of chaos.

Notes

This story is the product of many great minds from the PocketHog discord. I'm simply the one putting it down.

Beta for this chapter and creative genius: TharkFlark1

Birds of a Feather

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sonic relished in the crisp afternoon air as he turned a sharp corner, the wake of his own sonic boom buffeting him. Up ahead, a machine blasted the ground, sending stone and debris flying into the air. Leaping, twirling, and skidding over one low flying tree, Sonic avoided the obstacles with an ease that spoke of years of experience.

Sonic, now little more than a blue blur, sped down the track, hot on Eggman's trail. No big 'destroy-the-world' plots had popped up again after the last one, but that was no reason to go easy on the egghead.

"Tails! How's that prototype coming?"

The voice in his ear piece chimed in after a moment. "It's not quite ready, I don't know if it'll be useful."

"You said it's a burst of energy right? Otherwise harmless?" Leaping over a falling pillar Sonic launched forward, unfazed.

"Yeah, it's based on Infinite's ruby, without the warping reality features, but I just need more time-"

"That's good enough for me!" Grinning widely Sonic pulled out the shard from his head quills. Any protests Tails had were drowned out by the deafening boom of an explosion. Narrowing his eyes against the dust, Sonic evened out his strides, turning his focus to the small gem in hand. He'd need the boost to get rid of Egghead's contraptions and if it was harmless then the worst thing that could happen was it'd simply fizzle out.

Sonic reached out with his own chaos energy, tugging at the gem's like a thread on a rug ready to unravel, like Shadow had taught him to do with a chaos emerald. But it came undone too quickly for him to follow, crackling energy spilling beyond his grip.

The world blinked in a flash of light and suddenly Eggman's carrier was no longer flying in front of him.

Sonic skid to a halt as the hulking machine crashed into the ground with a mighty metallic groan, swatted out of the sky by something he

couldn't see.

"What was that," Tails voice crackled through the earpiece, transmission distorted by the waves of lingering energy. Sonic squinted, trying to see past the settling dust and smoke rising from the wreckage.

"Karmic retribution?" He ventured hesitantly, nonetheless jogging over to investigate. It was unlikely this was another of the crazy doctor's ploys, but one could never be sure. However, before he could get too close, a familiar blue shape zipped out. Green eyes widened in surprise, then in recognition, as he saw a pair of dark pupils staring back at him.

"Mini-me!" Sonic gleefully called out, waving at the smaller hedgehog. A wide grin on his face, he reached out to greet him with a high five. The younger one relaxed, clearly relieved at seeing a familiar face. He glanced over his shoulder to the smoking wreckage, worry flashing across his expression.

"You worried about ol' Egghead?" Sonic asked incredulously. It was odd to believe, but he did suppose this was his younger self. Eggman hadn't become truly unhinged until more recent years. But the younger Sonic only shook his head before approaching the crash site, motioning for the other to follow. He made a couple of short, quick movements with his hands that Sonic instantly recognized.

"Something's wrong?" He tried, watching his younger self nod and then shake his head, clearly confused. "Well, whatever it is, I'm sure we can handle it together. Two Sonics are better than one, right?" The younger Sonic gave him an inscrutable look, a mix between exasperation and amusement, before pointing at figures not ten feet away from them.

Blinking awake in the dirt were two distinct, but at the same time very *familiar* forms.

Eggman, spared from any injuries thanks to his safety measures, took one look at the four hedgehogs in front of him, did some speedy mental math, and simply got into the hover carrier flying off before they arrived to the same conclusion he had.

Facing one Sonic was the norm, two Sonics meant an interesting challenge that he was likely to lose, *four* Sonics however...

The human shook his head. Chaos, he'd need a drink tonight.

"Orbot, Cubot." He snapped into his receiver. There was a frantic scrambling on the other end as the two robots rushed to answer.

"Yes sir?"

"Book me that cruise one of you mentioned the other night. I think I need some time to myself after all…"

"You've got to be kidding me." Knuckles deadpanned as four hedgehogs strode into the Resistance base. Sonic's transmission had cut out soon after he'd acknowledged his younger version, saying it'd be better to explain in person.

Now Knuckles could see why.

The echidna pinched the bridge of his nose as his Sonic flashed him a shit-eating grin.

"Ayo Knux, looking a bit outnumbered now, aren't you?"

Knuckles snorted, turning his gaze to the rest. The short one he knew already, the more bowling ball-looking Sonic had joined them many times before, lending a hand in stopping cataclysmic events.

The other two, however, were new; they looked like Sonic □in the sense that the colorings were the same □but they were definitely *different* , to say the least. The smaller of the two was younger, the uncertain look in his eyes as he gazed in innocent wonder about the base told of inexperience with interdimensional situations. The tallest one definitely looked the most like his Sonic, but his arms were all blue with longer limbs swathed in bandages. Mummy Sonic tugged on a brown scarf when he noticed the echidna's gaze.

"Are you hurt?" Knuckles considered the bandages may not be a choice after all, though they looked clean...

"No," The lanky one offered him a reassuring smile, examining his

own limbs. “The wraps are for support, more than anything.”

Knuckles nodded, turning to his Sonic, something like a plea playing in his eyes. “What the hell is going on.”

“Whoa! Language there, Knux.”

The echidna snorted again. “Please, when you were his age,” he pointed to the round Sonic, “you were signing much worse to me.”

“Not because of *him.* Because of him.” Sonic placed a gloved hand atop the head of the younger of the two new hogs. The hedgehog didn’t flinch but glanced around nervously before flashing a grin that looked much more at home on his face. “Wachowski here is still only twelve, and apparently his mom is very serious about the swear jar.” Laughter danced in his eyes but he managed to keep his composure.

“*Wachowski? Mom?* ” Before Knuckles could splutter out any more questions, Sonic held up two hands in a placating gesture.

“I’ll explain everything, promise, just let Tails and the rest get here.” The fox in question strode in at that moment, brought up short as his older brother and three look-alikes turned to stare, recognition and warmth in their greeting smiles. He pursed his lips into a hard line, turning to look at his brother.

“Hm.” Sonic’s ears flicked back, at the fox’s tone. “Didn’t I say the gem wasn’t ready?” Tails asked lightly. But the temperature in the room dropped a couple of degrees.

“Hey, hey, you said this was *safe!* ”

“I said harmless! That doesn’t exclude this, clearly!”

Wachowski glanced at the taller, lankier hedgehog behind him, nudging him gently. “Is your Tails like this?” The scarf Sonic grinned down at him, crossing his arms easily.

“Yeah, a little. What about yours, still a little brother?” Wachowski grinned back, thinking of his brother back home. They hadn’t known each other long but it’d felt like meeting a lost part of him. He could see why now.

“Yeah, just last year actually.”

“*Oh my god.* ” Immediately, Sonic tensed, breaking off his argument

with Tails to see Amy at the threshold, followed by an annoyed looking Shadow and a confused Silver.

“Oh wow, are those hedgehogs? Like me?” Wachowski breathed. The taller hedgehog shot him a bewildered glance. Did the kid not know any other hedgehogs?

“Amy,” Sonic started, a warning lacing his easy greeting.

“Sonic.” She nodded, voice tight, but took a spot next to Knuckles, eyes fixed on the figures in front of her.

“Right.” Sonic greeted Shadow and Silver with a nod, returned with varying levels of enthusiasm. “Well, it seems like the simplest explanation is whatever happened with past me happened with… alternate me’s.”

“Good grief.” Shadow grumbled. The planet would rend itself apart with four Sonics.

“But it’s *fine,”* Sonic continued with a pointed glance at the dark hedgehog, “They should be able to go home just fine. Mini-me and I have dimension hopped already, so we can just chaos control them home and come back! Easy peasy.”

“Is dimension hopping really that easy?” Amy looked dubious, but her eyes remained on the four hedgehogs, as if she was trying to work something out.

“How hard can it be? Blaze does it all the time.”

“She’s also the user and guardian of seven *sol* emeralds, not chaos emeralds.” Shadow reminded him. “Even then, her control over it is more masterful-”

“Okay, so you can help me.”

“That’s not-”

“You *are*, after all, the best chaos user.” And Shadow was abruptly faced with a small dilemma; he could either dismiss the compliment and deny he was the best chaos user, or ignore that smug grin and be roped into help. Well, he was, after all, the best.

“Sonic’s trying to say something- whoa, buddy slow down it’s been years since I had to read any signing.” Shooting Knuckles an

exasperated glance, the round Sonic signed again, slowly and deliberately this time. The echidna perked up and nodded.

“Nicknames are a good idea,” he agreed. “Calling everyone Sonic would get real old real fast.”

“Dibs on Sonic!” Wachowski piped up, throwing two hands into the air.

“Okay, maybe no one should get dibs on Sonic. And you’re the only one with a last name *Wachowski,* so yours is easy enough.” The taller Sonic ribbed with an amused smile. The kid looked put out for only a brief moment, before shrugging. At baseball practice he was always called by his last name, so this was hardly a change of pace.

Eventually, through a lot of trial and a lot of horrible, *horrible* ideas, they settled on the Buck for the resistance leader, a nod to his unique, buckled shoes, Bowling Ball (or BB for short) for his younger counterpart, Scarf Mummy for the lankier hedgehog (“it’s a *bandana* ”), and Wachowski for the kid.

Amy walked over to join Shadow and Silver, watching the four Sonics talk amongst themselves animatedly, comparing various physical and dimensional differences.

“Is anyone else curious to know which Sonic is the fastest?”

“Is that why you’ve been staring at them?” Silver asked, sounded a bit relieved. Amy ignored that and nodded.

“Mainly, yeah. I mean they’re all Sonic, but they’re their own person as well. It’s crazy.”

“That’s how alternate dimensions work.” Shadow said dryly. “Similar but different.”

“A race!” It was Wachowski’s voice that rang out, his excitement practically energizing the room. Wait. Literally energizing the room, judging from the bright blue sparks that fizzled out from his quills. The other Sonics didn’t notice, joining in on the animated conversation over location and speeds and finish lines. Scarfz swooped Wachowski onto his shoulders, the kid enthusiastically pumping his arms in the air.

“Yeah! It’s crazy but I feel like I could run for hours.”

“Welcome to being Sonic, Sonic.” Wachowski ruffled the quills of the other, laughing as he was jostled.

“Hey Tails, how long can they stay til we have to take them back?” Buck called out. The fox in question looked up from his monitor, where he had hunkered down in the wake of the conversation of his brother and his three alternate selves.

“Well, their chaos energy isn’t compatible with anything but their own world, but according to my calculations, it shouldn’t really prove a problem unless there’s a sudden imbalance.”

The four Sonics blinked, exchanging glances.

“Uh-huh.”

“Two days." Tails simplified, to his brothers’ visible relief. "They can stay longer, but two days is the prime safe time.”

Nodding seriously, Buck turned to his other selves, wicked glee mirrored threefold. “You heard the fox.”

The next couple days were ridiculous to say the least. Buck had insisted on showing the newbies (Scarfz and Wachowski) all there was to do in his dimension, and he meant *everything* . The zones (Wachowski had been little uncomfortable in Green Hills Zone, but refused to say why), the cities, the chili-dog eating contests that Sonic was banned from, and even the various chao gardens around the planet (the gardens had been a fan favorite, with both pleading to a very distraught Tails to let them take one home).

On the final day, the race began. One lap around the planet, who ever made it back first was to be declared the fastest thing alive.

One blank shot, four streaks, and a couple hours later, the race was completed. It was a flurry of skill, balance, and sheer, unadulterated speed, the four hedgehogs revelling in the simplest of joys.

By the narrowest of margins, Wachowski crossed the finish line in a sudden burst of blue. *That* had been quite the reaction from the other three.

Scarfz and BB had brushed off their loss somewhat gracefully, but Buck simply collapsed face first into the dirt, refusing to move even when Shadow laughed so hard he began choking on his spit, pounding the ground with his fist in hysterics.

Wachowski had approached Buck, a bit hesitant, but a genuine smile on his face. "I've never run that fast," he admitted. "But that was so much fun." Buck pulled himself together, fixing the kid with a faux glare.

"Well, you better get used to those speeds kiddo! Because next time, I won't go so easy on you."

Behind him, Shadow *wheezed.*

It's should have surprised none to know that the hedgehogs departed with a promise to meet again. More than kindred spirits, they genuinely delighted in their similarities and differences. The promised reunion took place only two weeks after the initial one. Scarfz suggested they meet up at his, eager to have a movie night and a couple of races on home turf. Wachowski had to get the all clear from his parents (a concept both Buck and Scarfz found alien) but it was agreed so long as he's returned by the following morning.

"He's not your real dad, is he?" Buck asked him dubiously after picking up Wachowski. The kid shot him a confused look.

"Course he is, he's Donut Lord. Signed papers and everything."

"No, I mean-" Buck slapped a hand over his face, dragging it down tiredly. "Never mind, let's just get to Scarfz place." Wachowski took Buck's offered hand, feeling a lot like a little brother. Chaos control wasn't a new skill for him, but doing it across dimensions was definitely unfamiliar, and Buck and Shadow had agreed it might be best if he avoided doing it on his own without an emerald.

The two hedgehogs arrived in front of a spacious house, styled like a hut but with definite touches of reinforcements. The door opened almost immediately, its owner leaning casually against the doorway.

"Long time no see," Scarfz smiled. Buck noticed there were dark bags under his eyes, but the hedgehog looked lively nonetheless. "No, BB?"

Buck shrugged, "Kid said something Eggman came up and to start without him, he'll show up eventually." He did a double take, fully taking in the other hedgehog. "Dude, you look like roadkill." Buck

gestured towards Scarf's eyes and his mussed quills.

“Yeah, yeah.” Scarfz bumped his shoulder amicably as the other hedgehog entered, giving Wachowski a high five. “I’ve just had a stubborn cold. Nothing major.” He shrugged, closing the door.

“You get sick?” Buck raised a surprised brow ridge at him.

“Not usually, but from time to time something sticks.”

“You *don’t* get sick?” Wachowski turned to Buck, eyes narrowed in suspicion. Buck only grinned, swiping a thumb across his nose.

“Almost never. Tails said something about chaos energy and it keeping me healthy, but I forgot the details.” Wachowski seemed a bit stunned but ultimately unsurprised, as if that had answered an old question for him. His eyes landed on the stack of DVD’s in the center of the living room.

“*Please* tell me we’re watching something with Keanu.” In a blink he was at the table, poring over the selection.

“Nope! We’re watching one of the greatest movies to ever grace mobian-kind.” Scarfz grinned, holding up a dvd box. “Tomatopotomus 4: Rise of the Hero!” Wachowski huffed, disappointed but intrigued by the colorful box.

True to form, even watching a movie was a hectic affair. But Scarfz settled comfortably into his spot, feeling at ease, the presence of his new friends (even though they were technically him) pushing any worries over his cold to the back of his mind.

Tails noticed first.

Once all the other Sonic’s went home the next morning with the aid of some gems Sonic yawned and said he was tired. The fox had quirked a brow at that, the array of hedgehogs had slept well into the morning, but they had been up late doing gods knew what. So the fox left his brother to sleep a while longer, promising to keep him updated in case anything came up.

Hours later when he, Knuckles, Amy and Sticks barged in, he was still

passed out on the couch.

“Sonic? Wake up, it's time for food.” The blue hedgehog blinked blearily, struggling to consciousness.

“Whu?” He coughed, “Dude, I asked if you could let me sleep.” Tails blinked at his older brother, wondering if he was joking.

“I did?” Amy leaned over, brow furrowed in faux annoyance.

“C’mon, you spent all night with your alternate selves. Time for dinner with your friends, *Scarfz.”* The pink hedgehog giggled, nudging Sticks beside her. “At least creativity is something they all lack. They call the little round one *Bowling Ball* .”

“It’s because he’s small and round and looks like a bowling ball.” Sonic snapped, a touch irritable. His eyelids still felt like they had weights attached to them but he’d already slept for so long. “Also it’s BB, for short.”

“Uhuh,” Sticks stuck out a hand to help her friend up. “And what about that weird one? With the naked arms.”

“It’s just his fur pattern, Sticks.” But Sonic would be lying if he said he didn’t think the look was weird as well. “And we call him Buck.”

Amy paused, putting a finger to her mouth pensively. “Okay now that one has me stumped. Why Buck?”

Sonic glanced away. “Uh. His shoes have these huge buckles on them and Wachowski thought they were cool and it just sorta stuck.”

“Kinda weird that the kid has a last name huh,” Knuckles mused. “What even is a Wachowski, he looks like a hedgehog to me. Ish.”

“His parent’s name.” At the expected incredulous looks, Sonic only shrugged. “I know, I know. But they’re human apparently. Long story short, it’s his adopted name. And he *really* likes being called Wachowski.” The bitter downturn in his words was apparent. But as quick as it came, he shook it off, throwing his friends a tired smile. “Good for him. Kid deserves it.”

Amy moved closer. None of them were a stranger to loss and loneliness, but it still hurt seeing her friends affected by it. “Sonic…” she started, but was cut off by the hedgehog.

“No need Ames, I know where you’re going with it, I appreciate it, but let’s just get some Meh Burger right now.” Bandaged arms reached up high in a stretch. “I could really use the fuel.”

Tails kept stealing glances at his brother. Snippets of his old self appeared here and there but the hedgehog looked dead on his feet.

“Maybe you should order soup,” Amy suggested carefully. “If you’re getting sick it might be more nutritious.” Sonic pulled a face and shook his head.

“No. No way. I came for real food.”

“Besides he looks like he might drown if he tries to eat soup,” Sticks snickered as Sonic nearly nodded off. Blue quills jerked up abruptly at the mention, and Sonic turned, shooting her a glare.

“I’m *fine.”*

The topic veered into less tense territory, Amy and Knuckles intrigued by the multiple Sonics and asking about their counterparts (“I’d love to see my alternate self, I bet they’re as fierce and independent as me,” and “Imagine what *four* Tails could do.”) but throughout it all Tails couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy.

His brother turned, jostling him slightly. “What’s up?” The fox only stared a beat longer, before offering his own small smile in return.

“Nothing. Just glad you had fun.”

“Oh fun doesn’t begin to cover it, let me tell you what BB did- that little guy sent Eggman *screeching* -” Sonic launched into the tale, slightly more animated than before, but it seemed forced. Tails tucked the worry away, jumping on Sticks’s wild conspiracy of alternate alien-like versions of themselves that would take over their planet.

The sound of objects clashing and shuffling papers was deafening to

the fox.

Where the hell is it?! He'd already searched through his lab and on the tables in it. The living area was essentially turned upside down in his frantic search. Tails straightened suddenly, before bounding off to his room as fast as he could move. *Of course! I lent it to Sticks, she gave it back and I put it-* skidding to a halt in front of his dresser he stuck his hand in the largest drawer.

"Hah!" Holding the device triumphantly, Tails turned on his heel, running back out to his lab.The lights in the lab were dimmed. That wasn't how he'd left them. But in the hammock near the entrance he spied a familiar, spiky figure."Sonic?"

Shuffling, then a head raised weakly, green eyes hardly focusing. "M'yeah?"

"I found it, just stay still, okay?" Tails murmured soothingly. The hedgehog only nodded, letting his head fall back on the fabric of the hammock. Tails powered up the scanner, a specialized one he'd repurposed for health checks. Guilt gnawed at him as he realized he should have done this much longer ago.

Sonic had all but hobbled to his lab, unable to run, barely able to walk. He'd gone on a mission or two in the past two weeks but after seeing how drained they left him the group had decided to keep him to bed rest until he got better. Tails carefully unwrapped his hands, sanitizing them before he obtained any blood or fur samples.

Was it poison maybe? Tails laid out the timeline in his head as he prepared the instruments, a single lamp lighting his work station so as to not to disturb his brother. When Sonic had been snatched away to his alternate self's dimension over a month ago, he'd been fine. Healthy. When he returned from the alternate dimension he'd been *better.* Tails distinctly remembered him bragging about breaking speed records and even catching up to Wachowski, who apparently gave Buck a run for his money despite being younger. Then he'd started feeling ill… well, tired mostly, if he were to go by the descriptions Sonic had given him. Chronic exhaustion was the top symptom, followed by increased appetite and lethargy.

Brow furrowed, Tails turned back to his brother, who was watching him quietly, gaze focused in a rare moment of wakefulness.

"You're gonna get wrinkles like that." His voice rasped slightly, mainly due to a lack of use in the past couple of days, but the fox

couldn't help the smile that tugged at his lips, an effortless response to his brother's light tone.

"Gotta give your mug a fighting chance, don't I?" Sonic unwrapped his bandages and tugged off his gloves, extending blue arms with a snort.

"Oh, you got jokes now?"

"Learned from the best." Green eyes softened at the compliment, before he smacked his brother's nose lightly in a rather slow movement.

"Don't you forget it either. Now," He licked his lips, a nervous tone coloring his words, "hurry up and get the poking out of the way."

"I'll be quick." Tails promised.

The samples hardly took five minutes to obtain. Tails spoke very little, focusing on getting everything as quickly as possible. It wasn't that Sonic hated doctors or check ups, but the process of drawing blood, saliva samples, anything, seemed to be a delicate process for him. Tails had never asked, he hardly believed Sonic even knew why himself.

"Okay." he took a step back, nodding to the pile of bandages in the blue hedgehog's lap. "You can put those back on now. I'll start looking over these, get some rest Sonic."

Sonic shoved the bandages to the side, too tired to go through the wrapping process, he'd deal with it later. "Fine, but only because it's late. Don't stay up too late, 'kay? Can't have my sidekick falling asleep fighting Robuttnik." Tails laughed, hoping Sonic wouldn't hear how hollow it sounded. But the hero was already fast asleep, breath sounding a touch labored.

Frowning, Tails returned to his work station.

"Amy, I know it's late, but please," The fox glanced around quickly, but he was still alone, Sonic was still slumbering in the lab. He turned back to the phone, " *please,* just get here and bring the others." There was a beat of silence before his friend's voice replied, steady and

awake, a far cry from how she'd answered the call.

"Give us ten minutes."

It hardly took that before a soft knock came from his door. Tails let them in, his friends framed by moonlight as they entered the dark room. Amy raised a brow ridge once her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

"Saving on electricity?"

"I just kept the lights off for him, but he's out. I can-"

"No, it's fine," Amy interrupted reassuringly. The fox seemed distracted, not even able to catch the light tone she'd started with. Knuckles glanced around the room, searching for the blue hedgehog.

"So where is he?" Tails gestured to the direction of the lab and began walking.

"He came over and basically collapsed in his hammock in the lab. I decided to run some tests because he's been sleeping and eating so much and *something* is clearly wrong. And, it's not good." He concluded grimly, finally arriving at the computer. Sonic was at the other end of the lab, fast asleep. Knuckles, Amy, and Sticks shot him worried glances before turning back to the screen.

Multiple graphs and numbers popped up, completely meaningless to the trio. Sticks looked at Tails, who was staring at the screen with a grim expression.

"Uh, these images are pretty and all, but weren't you gonna tell us what's wrong with Sonic?" She reminded the fox in a harsh whisper. Tails nodded briskly, pointing out a particular diagram that seemed to be vaguely hedgehog shaped.

"So, on all physical accounts, nothing is wrong with him. His body is being affected but it's not-" he grappled for a moment for the words, "it's not *in* him. There's no traces of poisoning, no wounds, internal or otherwise, brain function is normal, everything looks fine but it's *not*. And I was just about to give up when, " A few quick clicks brought up another reading. "Look at this."

"Energy readings?" Sticks read off the top, confused.

"It was just another test, a shot in the dark. Every living being puts

out a bit of natural electricity so I measured Sonic's. His has always been a little different but he always said it was probably because of his speed, but look at the readings now." A gloved hand pointed out where the graph plummeted. "Compared to the last time I took his readings it's incredibly low. Even when compared to mine it's nearly halved. And I don't know if something is draining his energy, if it's some special kind of poison, or *why* he's even burning through it so much. It should be replenished naturally!" His voice pitched a bit higher, frustration bleeding through. Gritting his teeth, Tails dismissed the images.

"Has he been introduced to any new energy sources? Eggman, maybe?" Amy's eyes were calculating, already running through multiple scenarios.

"No," Tails sighed. "He's barely been able to fight, much less be exposed to anything new. It started happening around the time he met the other Sonics."

Amy was suddenly in his face, eyes wide and serious. "That's it then! It must have been them-"

"Why would the Sonics try and hurt him, isn't he them?" Knuckles scratched his head, frowning.

"What if it wasn't on purpose? Tails, you're looking for a purposeful cause but Sonic was literally dragged to a foreign dimension. What if something happened?" But Tails was already moving, fingers flying over his keyboard at a harsh pace.

"I didn't think of that!" There was no time to waste mentally berating himself, instead he lined up the information to see if it could support Amy's theory. Almost. The timelines matched up, but nothing yet explained why his brother was losing so much energy. He needed to know precisely what had happened.

Tails straightened, looking across the dark lab to where Sonic was sleeping. "We need to talk to them. Get them to come here. Or go there."

Amy saw the hesitation in his stance as he realized he'd have to wake his brother. He'd sounded so terrified when he'd called her and she couldn't imagine being surrounded by all this information and not being able to answer what was wrong. Reaching out to grasp his shoulder, she offered him her best smile.

“It’s late. Get some rest, it’s not too long til morning anyway. We can ask him then.”

“We can’t- I can’t. What if this is serious and not just some interdimensional cold, Amy.”

“We only have a theory right now.” She pointed out carefully.

“And the other Sonic’s are probably asleep right now too.” Knuckles chimed in. Tails nodded hesitantly. He *was* very tired.

“I’m sorry for making you come all the way out here-”

“Ah-ah,” Sticks cut him off, steering him towards the cot she knew he kept in the lab. “Apologies are for the day time. See you then.” Grumbling a reply, the fox reluctantly sunk into the cot, briefly hating how easily he gave in.

“Sonic’s room has a bed, there’s a couple cots and the sofa in the living room-”

“We’ll make do. Ol’ knucklehead here can probably sleep on the ground.” The echidna in question nodded, serious.

“It’s soft.”

Tails watched his friends leave the lab silently, before finally drifting off to sleep.

“Hey guys, what’re you all doing here?” Four pairs of eyes turned to stare at the blue hedgehog who’d just lumbered into the kitchen.

“Hey Sonic,” Knuckles greeted easily, something like hope in his eyes. “You feeling better?”

“Oh I’m fine.” Sonic waved him off. Their expressions fell ever so slightly at that, before rearranging themselves.

“There any breakfast going? I’m starving.” Tails nodded, already getting up before Amy set a hand on his shoulder, casting a meaningful glance in his direction.

“I’ll make a fresh plate for you. Take a seat.” Nodding gratefully, Sonic slumped in the chair she’d been occupying, pillowing his head on his arms. He groaned lightly when he felt a finger prodding his arm.

“Sonic.” The blue hedgehog only flicked a single ear. “Sonic.” Tails repeated, sternly. “I need to know how the other Sonics got here.” The hero finally raised a head, shooting his brother an annoyed look, green eyes dull.

“Why?”

“I think they might have something to do with this. We need to contact them.” Sonic pursed his lips, thinking for a moment.

“Something with gems, I think.” he answered finally, laying his head back down. “I’m not sure, but usually I hitch a ride with Buck or his Shadow if he’s around.” Tails started at that, deciding to file away that question for later. Shadow helping Sonic? Alternate dimensions sure were wild.

“Okay… so do you have a way to contact them?”

“Not really,” came the muffled reply. “We just sorta meet up when we can. Buck and BB have the most experience dimension hopping so they’d be your best bet.”

“Did you have any other meet up time scheduled then?” The drainage of Sonic’s energy had plateaued slightly but Tails wasn’t willing to risk waiting much longer. He needed to find out what was going on, and fast.

“M’not sure. Can’t really remember…” Eyelids drooping, Sonic started to drift off back to sleep, unable to keep track of the conversation. His expression perked up slightly as something delicious was placed directly in front of him. “Oh thank god,” he grabbed the plate eagerly, shooting Amy a brief smile. “Thanks Amy.”

The pink hedgehog flashed him a bright smile in response, taking a seat beside Sticks. “Well, I’m glad *someone* enjoys my cooking.” She sniffed pointedly.

The badger only rolled her eyes, chewing on an indistinguishable mess on her plate. “Listen the recipe for slop is very simple, I’m not sure how you managed to mess it up-”

“You just threw all that in the microwave and called it breakfast!”

“*Exactly.* ” Satisfied, Sticks turned to her breakfast, munching away happily. A little green, Amy looked away, trying not to focus too much on it.

“So! Any leads?” She asked, fingers drumming lightly on the table top.

“Not as of now.” Tails sighed. “I’ll look into creating something that might be able to reach them, but with how long that might take it might be better to just wait-”

“What about Eggman?” Knuckles leaned over his empty plate.

“What about him?” Sonic grumbled past a mouthful of food.

“Well, he was able to tear that hole in the world, he might know something about alternate dimensions, and besides. Two heads are better than one.” Amy had the decency this time to contain her surprise at the idea.

“That’s a good idea, Knux.” The echidna beamed, flashing her a thumbs up.

“Don’t expect many more.”

“I don’t know.” Sticks cut in, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Can we trust Eggman?”

“No.” Sonic answered immediately, before inhaling another forkful.

“We don’t have much of a choice, really. And I’m sure he wouldn’t want his nemesis destroyed by something other than him…”

“How considerate.” Sonic commented curtly.

“Let’s give it a shot.” The fox stood up, both tails bristling in excitement at the plan. It wasn’t much but it was better than sitting and waiting.

“You guys go ahead,” Sonic yawned, pushing himself up from his chair. “I’m gonna go take a power nap. Wake me if you need me.” Ambling off back to the lab (and taking the proper bed this time, the hammock left his spines all out of shape), his friends watched him worriedly.

Sending a message to the crazy doctor was the easy part. The human seemed to delight in the drama of an opponent's grand entrance or declaration of war that he often kept his communication channels open. Getting him to *agree* , however, proved a more challenging task.

"So let me get this straight." Eggman pressed his palms together, the tops of his fingers steepled beneath his chin. "You want me, Dr. Robotnik, to help Sonic, who is my arch nemesis, get better."

Tails glared at Eggman, trying to not let his frustration show. "Yes." When Eggman burst into laughter however, it morphed into something hot and angry. Fingers twitching, Tails only stayed in place thanks to Knuckles' and Amy's grounding presence.

"We're serious, Eggman. He's not...he's not well." Amy leaned in, trying to catch the human's eye. "Can't you put this aside for a bit? After all, don't you want to be the one to take Sonic down? Not some random illness?"

Smart, appealing to his sense of ego, Tails thought grimly. It intrigued Eggman as well, who'd stopped laughing and seemed to be considering her words. His heart promptly sunk through the floor as a wry smile spread over the human's face.

"Nice try, Amy. But, if you're going to try to pull wool over my eyes, maybe don't bring along the hedgehog who's supposedly *so* sick-" The three turned to where he was pointing to see Sonic, jogging weakly after them in the distance. Shock zeroing into anger, Tails glared at his brother, who despite looking little better than a clipped puppet, had a determined gleam in his eyes.

"I didn't think you'd actually *do* it! Are you crazy?!" The hedgehog's words were hardly more than a rasp. Amy gasped, bolting without a word towards Sonic.

"Sonic! What a surprise," chuckled Eggman, reaching into his pocket. "Here I thought I might have to lure you out, this makes things so much easier."

"Wait!" Tail stepped forward, hands out and pleading. He knew what was going to happen. "Eggman please, this isn't a trap. We need your

help, *please* .” The human hesitated, for only a brief moment. He looked at Tails, gaze inscrutable behind the dark glasses.

“You’ve always been a superb actor, Tails.”

The fox didn’t even see the robot creeping up beside him until it knocked him over. He went sprawling in the dirt, pain shooting up his side. The sound of metallic whirring and clanking filled the air as more robots clanked through the undergrowth,

“You cheat,” he gasped, refusing to voice his pain. “You were never going to hear us out.” Tails felt his heart hammering in his throat, he had scarcely slept, eaten even less, and the remains of his hope tethered on Eggman just *listening* to them.

“Not true,” Eggman disagreed, having the gall to sound insulted. “I was just prepared for what I knew was most certainly-”

“SONIC!” Amy’s scream drowned out whatever Eggman was going to say. She was leaping over the robots, raining destruction in her haste to make it to Sonic. The blue form was on the ground, convulsing.

“What’s wrong with him, why isn’t he attacking-”

Tails couldn’t exactly remember what happened, but one moment he was on the ground, and the next, he was standing over a shocked looking Eggman, on his back and holding his cheek.

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder, but he wrenched free, leaning down to be face to face with the human.

“If you’re not going to help us, then *stay the hell out of our way* .” And the human must have seen something in that blazing blue gaze, their owner restrained only by Knuckle’s strong grip. He stayed silent, deactivating his bots with another press of the button. Even when they turned away, the echidna scooping up the limp body of the blue hedgehog, Eggman didn’t get up, watching them leave with a darkening expression.

“What the hell was he thinking?” Knuckles stole a glance at the still hedgehog in his arms. Tails' plane hadn’t been too far from where

they'd met Eggman. He doubted he could have run the distance back to Tail's lab carrying Sonic but he would have done it in a heartbeat.

The fox piloting the plane was silent, expression as if it were carved from stone. Something was very wrong with Sonic. He'd collapsed and a quick check of his vitals told them his body was crashing rapidly.

"He must have pushed himself so hard," Amy spoke quietly. Green eyes betrayed a brief moment of anger before it was put out, shoulders drooping. "He was worried. I would have done the same."

Tails pursed his lips, a white knuckled grip on the wheel.

The flight back to the lab hardly took ten minutes, but they were agonizingly slow, each of them acutely aware that Sonic, while still breathing, still hadn't woken up. The hospital was nearly an immediate no. They might have had more equipment than him but the mere thought of putting Sonic in the care of the village sickened Tails to his core.

Once landed, Knuckles placed Sonic in Tails bed, careful not to jostle him too much.He wished he could say the hedgehog at least looked peaceful in sleep, but his brow was tense and a sheen of sweat covered his body, which shook occasionally from tremors. Tails scanned him quickly, going pale as he read the results. He screwed his eyes shut, the words swimming tauntingly behind his eyelids,

"Kidney failure." He recited, feeling as if a freezing hand had slipped between his ribs and grasped his heart in a vise. It didn't last long however, as Amy jumped into action, shoving him and Knuckles aside in her brusque haste.

"We worry about the 'how' later." She snapped, and Knuckles and Tails got the impression that it wasn't directed at them. "Right now we help him."

The next half hour was too fast and at the same time indescribably muddled. Tails rattled off a list of things they needed, only a handful of them making sense. He ordered Sticks to go look for Shadow ("Drag him here if you have to, he's the only other super sonic hedgehog.") while he, Knuckles, and Amy set about the daunting task of stabilizing Sonic enough.

"I think Sticks is on her way back." Knuckles called out, squinting out past the large doors that led to the lab.

“Do you think she’ll need help?” Gaze intent on the faraway figure, Amy tried to make out the form of her friend and the dark hedgehog. Surely Shadow wasn’t *that* tall.

“It’s Eggman.” Tails recognized the taller human, walking alongside Sticks. Resisting the urge to bare his teeth he jumped into the air, aided by his namesakes to land in the cockpit of the Tornado. Protecting his brother took precedence right now, Tails started formulating his plan, figuring out the best way to lure Eggman away and why had Sticks even led him *here* -

“Wait, they’re - they’re walking *together* .”

“Yes, I can see that Knuckles.” Tails snapped, the mechanisms locking into place as the machine booted up. The echidna only shook his head, pointing again.

“Tails *look,* they’re not fighting.” And Tails spared them another glance, controls shaking in his hands. He hated to admit it, but the way the two were walking, tense but not hostile, was enough proof.

“I’m not getting out of here,” He stated stubbornly, piloting the mech towards the door. "If he tries to attack, you protect Sonic. I'll go on the offensive.” Knuckles flashed him a thumbs up, nodding.

“Fair enough, buddy.” Knuckles squinted, shielding his eyes against the setting sun. “Where’s Shadow?”

The human and the badger approached the lab, Sticks uncharacteristically quiet. A small hoverbot was following the human sedately, a bulky charge on its back.

“So,” Sticks licked her lips, eyes darting between the human and her friends. “There was a slight hiccup.”

Reality-hopping was not as complicated as one would assume when in possession of a generator of near infinite chaos energy. Sonic left the Resistance base, a lightness to his step that he hadn’t felt in over a year if he was being honest. Reconstruction was a slow but steady process, businesses and homes sprouting in the wake of the destruction of Eggman’s maniacal attempt with the phantom ruby.

There was always work to be done, but it hardly felt like he was sludging through the days anymore.

“Morning Shads!” The hero greeted cheerfully, spotting the sullen hedgehog not too far away. Shadow scowled at the nickname, but nodded in greeting.

“Let’s make this quick, hedgehog,” he spoke curtly, the set of his shoulders tense.

“Don’t like spending too much time with one hedgehog who’s faster than you, let alone four?” The hero grinned cheekily, tossing the emerald in his direction. Shadow caught it deftly, shooting him a glare.

“Hmph. One of you makes enough of a mess.”

“C’mon Shads, tonight is race night! You can’t tell me you aren’t curious about how fast mini-me can be.”

“I’m aware of the round one’s speed. If anything, he’s slower than-”

“Ah-ah,” Sonic waggled his finger, a truly evil grin growing now. “The *other* kid.” Pausing to try to remember which blue hedgehog he meant, Shadow finally raised a dubious brow.

“You can’t be serious. As hilarious as your first race was, it had to have been a fluke.” Shadow was as fast as Sonic, if the kid was *faster* then-

“Oh, but I am, kid’s a natural user of chaos energy.” *That* caught the black hedgehog’s interest. Sure, Sonic was a skilled wielder of chaos energy, but it was a skill he’d picked up over the years.

“Natural, you say?” Sonic controlled his grin, knowing full well he had him now.

“Yeah, it’s almost like he generates it or something.” The gem in the black hedgehog’s hand gleamed briefly, its own energy properly contained within the perfect cut of the stone.

“Ten minutes.” As he turned away, Sonic punched the air silently, following the Ultimate Lifeform. “And this is the last time you use me as a ‘chaos control taxi,’ as you so kindly put it.”

“Well, you’re the best at it and the kid’s parents get a little worried-”

“Then practice harder.” And before Sonic could offer back another retort, Shadow clasped his shoulder and focused in. Reality bended to his will, folding itself around the two hedgehogs, before they blinked out of existence-

-and reappeared in a quiet clearing, the sound of barking bleeding into the air as their senses readjusted to the interdimensional equivalent of being shot like a spitball across different realities. Sonic pulled a face, sticking a finger into his ringing ear.

“Chaos, that still sucks.”

“Please tell me you know where we are.” Shadow had only assisted the Sonics once, in returning the Wachowski kid to his parents. The round one was surprisingly proficient on his own. “And tell me again, why this isn’t happening in *our* dimension.” He asked, feeling the unfamiliar prickle of a foreign chaos energy spiking the air.

“Apparently, Scarfz doesn’t have an emerald. So to make it easy, we just meet at his place. Super chill place, except for their Sha-” He’s abruptly cut off by a staticky blue blur that bowls him over, sending them tumbling a couple hundred feet deeper into the forest. Shadow stared at the moment where Sonic was less than a second ago, before following the trail of disturbed foliage. Not two minutes in this world and the kid, Wachowski, had already shut Sonic up. A wry smile tugged at the dark hedgehog’s lips. Not bad indeed.

“ *Sonic!* Hey! Donut Lord started worrying but totally kept denying it and Mom said if you were even a *second* late she wouldn’t share the cookies we made but I told her that’s impossible because you’re me and we’re way too fast to be late-” Sonic thought idly about grabbing the floating birds that seemed to be circling his heads, the kid’s voice only vaguely registering past the ringing in his head.

Did someone catch the plates of that tree?

The kid, on the other hand, looked perfectly unruffled, a far cry from the nervous hedgehog he’d been when they’d first met.

“Alright, alright kiddo,” Sonic chuckled, allowing the kid to help him up. “No such thing as late for Sonic the Hedgehog.”

“That’s what *I* said-”

“So this is faster mini-you.” Both blue heads whipped around at the deep baritone, Shadow stepping easily over a fallen sapling.

“Oh yeah! Shads, meet Sonic Wachowski, we just call him Wachowski though. Kiddo, this is Shadow the Hedgehog.” An easy confidence followed Wachowski now, emboldened both by the presence of the other Sonic and the fact that this was *his* world. He met the intense red stare of the black hedgehog head on. Finally, Shadow nodded.

“You’re fast,” he noted. Wachowski grinned, swiping a thumb across his nose, a move so reminiscent of his own Sonic it was uncanny.

“Fastest thing alive,” he bragged easily. Shadow couldn’t help the chuckle, looking at his own Sonic.

“About as humble, too.”

“Alright, alright.” Sonic griped, pulling a face. “You said goodbye to your folks, kiddo?”

“Yeah, mom said 10:00 A.M. sharp or else she’s sending Tails.” They both winced at that. Apparently, in every universe, Tails had a wild protective streak.

“10:00 A.M. Got that Shads?”

“Just grab on, faker.” Shadow scowled, adding a bit softer then, “You too, Wachowski.”

“Hope you didn’t have a big dinner,” Sonic stage whispered to Wachowski. “Shadow’s chaos controls are a *bit* bumpy-”

“Chaos help me Sonic, I *will* leave you here.” The blue hedgehog’s jaw snapped shut with a click, smiling innocently. Rolling his eyes, Shadow focused on the gem once more, drawing on the swirling, massive source of energy within it.

“ *Chaos control!* ”

For the second time that day, they winked out of existence.

“Egghead we need to *help* him not take more scans!”

“How do you think anything will get done if you don’t even know what the problem is!”

“He’s going through kidney failure! That’s the most important-”

“Not yet. His kidneys are low functioning but they haven’t shut down yet.”

“And *that’s* supposed to be comforting?!”

Amy had never seen Knuckles so heated, fur bristling and fists clenched tightly at his sides, as if ready to swing a punch. Eggman, on the other hand, was calm and collected, slipping into a detached, professional demeanor that might have been an old echo of the past. He *had* been a doctor, none of them had ever really thought to ask what kind…

“Knuckles, we shouldn’t really be arguing right now.” she said worriedly. Sonic was drifting in and out of consciousness, exhaustion tugging him down every couple of minutes now. But the confusion and struggle to understand what was going on was apparent and tiring him out even more. “Especially not in front of Sonic.”

“You’re taking *his* side?!”

“It’s not about sides, now for the love of the gods *lower your voice* .” Her fingers twitched again with the urge to summon her hammer. But another glance at Sonic’s still form erased the urge in an instant. Eyes open and glassy, he was trying to focus on his surroundings, green eyes darting between Eggman, Knuckles, and Amy.

“W-wha-”

“Sonic! It’s okay, everything’s okay. Eggman’s here to help.” And if the situation weren’t so dire, she might have laughed at the incredulous look that crossed the blue hedgehog’s face.

“Sounds like a trap.” he mumbled.

“Unfortunately, it’s true." Eggman pressed Sonic back down into bed, voice oddly reassuring. "We may be rivals Sonic, but the one who gets to take you out won't be a measly illness."

Sonic grumbled something that they couldn't quite catch, before his eyes rolled back. Eggman cursed, before turning back to his own scanner.

Tails barged in at that moment, arms laden with multiple boxes. His eyes immediately darted to his brother. "How is he?"

"Same as when you left." The doctor said curtly, not looking up from his work. Tails bit back a scathing remark, dropping the boxes and unpacking them.

"I located Shadow. He's hiding in some cave. It's far but if I go I can reach it in-"

" *Hey Scarfz!"* Tails dropped the bags of fluid, instantly recognizing the voice. He sprinted through the lab, through the living area, nearly tearing the door off its hinges in order to open it. Three hedgehogs looked at him, not expecting him to be the one to open the door.

" *You.* " He pointed to the oldest one, Buck, his mind provided helpfully. Frustration, relief, and anger threatened to seethe over in an embarrassing display of emotion that might be teary or violent. "Please," he managed, "we need your help."

"Tails!" They all turned at Amy's scream, piercing and cutting through the house like a knife. She emerged from the hallway, eyes barely registering the hedgehogs behind her friend. "He's slipping into renal failure." She breathed, hands clasped around her mouth as if she could scarcely bear to say the words.

The shock of it hardly had an effect on the fox, who turned to face the shades of his brother plus Shadow. His brother who was well and truly dying now. "It's best if I explain inside." He said dully, gesturing for the three to follow.

Chapter End Notes

Buck = Modern
BB = Classic
Scarz = Boom
Wachowski = Movie

Ambient Hollow

Chapter Notes

> Special thanks to TharkFlark1, without their beta skills and general help, this chapter wouldn't be up on time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the three hedgehogs followed Tails into the lab they got the distinct impression of being in a hospital. The homely clutter that normally accompanied the fox's workspace had been shoved to the side, making much room for the singular bed in the center of the room surrounded by various monitors and machinery. In the bed, damp with sweat and breathing shallowly, was a blue figure that, to anyone else, would look absolutely unrecognizable from the normal proud figure the hero cut.

"Scarfz?" Buck's eyes were wide, taking in his friend's pallid complexion. The hedgehog didn't reply, breathing raggedly, brow furrowed in pain. "What's wrong with him?" Buck couldn't tear his eyes away, but he had the presence of mind to step in front of Wachowski. The kid would see plenty of horrors throughout his life, he could at least try and spare him this.

"Currently, renal failure." In a blink, Buck and his Shadow had tensed, recognizing the human voice that came from a corner of the room. Shadow stepped forward, stance at the ready, the beginnings of a chaos spear crackling at his fingertips. Eggman didn't bother to look up at them, brow furrowed over a screen he was poring over, trying to make sense of the data.

"Doctor." The greeting was cordial, a stark contrast to their defensive stance. Tails stepped forward, prodding both hedgehog's until they had to step back.

"I assume you know Dr. Eggman, he's currently keeping my brother stable and cooperating. No fighting." The fox's tone brooked no argument. Shadow pursed his lips but said nothing.

Eggman finally glanced up, eyeing the three new hedgehogs that had entered. "I believe explanations are in order." he said after a brief pause. Buck narrowed his eyes, crossing his arms.

"For once, I agree."

Beside the bed, Tails turned to his brother, adjusting the blankets and fiddling with the dials of the medical equipment, all the while refusing to let the sleeping hedgehog out of his sight for longer than a handful of seconds. “Sonic was dragged into another dimension a few weeks back; he ran into three other counterparts. They meet up sometimes and to not get mixed up, they gave each other names: This is Buck and his dimension’s Shadow,” he rattled off the information quickly to Eggman. “He began to show initial symptoms weeks back, and we asked Eggman for help stabilizing him just yesterday. But according to the information we have on the declining health, all of this happened not long after he returned from meeting his counterparts.” Here the fox paused, as if remembering something, glancing around the room. “Where’s Wachowski?”

The hedgehog in question had moved to examine one of the many monitors, scrutinizing them intently. “Mom’s a doctor,” he turned to look at Tails and rest, an idea forming. “She’s a doctor for animals and helped me when I got hurt. Maybe she can help him?” It was truly a trademark of each super sonic hedgehog that they simply had an endless reservoir of hope and drive, a small, hopeful smile bloomed across the kids face.

Eggman frowned, considering this other hedgehog. This was a kid, younger than his own Sonic and the counterparts that had reacted to him initially. He shook his head. “His body is failing him, but it’s all a symptom of a deeper, underlying problem.”

“And yet you insist on running more tests,” Buck’s eyes widened as Knuckles stepped in, holding a tray that looked tiny in his massive hands, even Shadow stiffened subtly beside him. Scarfz had briefly mentioned his friends and the most noticeable difference had been the goofiness and thick-headedness of his Knuckles. The echidna that strode into the room was a far cry from that, reminding Buck of his friend when he hadn’t yet learned to control his temper. And he was *huge*, built like a tank ,but lacking the specialized gloves that were considered an echidna trademark.

“I need to know exactly what happened when he arrived in your world, he was fine before that.” Tails cut in, giving the echidna a warning glance. Knuckles rolled his eyes, tension disappearing almost entirely before handing the tray to Amy and stepping out once more. “Something is draining him, and we’re running out of time. His body’s energy is low but beyond that we have nothing to go on.” Amy, having not said anything else since their initial meeting, eyed the newcomers curiously.

Shadow considered the fox's words, thinking back on the day they all arrived, but something was kicking at the back of his mind. A discomfort that was foreign and subtle. The air felt thin, like he was trying to breathe through a narrow tube, but it wasn't a physical sensation.

Tiny wisps of chaos energy colored the air in his senses. Normally such small traces would be next to impossible to make out, like trying to find smoke in a sauna. But he managed to follow the faint trail to his source nonetheless, arriving at Scarfz's still body.

"His chaos energy is low," he noted, finally, approaching the bed. Being so attuned to the natural underlying thrum of chaos energy, its absence was physically jarring to the Ultimate Lifeform. A drainage of chaos energy of this magnitude wasn't something he usually searched for, but this was impossible to feel. "Is something siphoning it?" Reaching out with his own chaos energy, Shadow searched for any leaks or voids, anything that might indicate the energy was being abnormally drained. His frown deepened as it receded. There was nothing.

"Chaos energy?" Amy repeated, confused. Shadow stopped short, this clearly wasn't the response he had expected. Exchanging a short, alarmed glance with Buck, the black hedgehog nodded slowly before continuing.

"His chaos energy is low, dangerously so." Confused stares met him all around and Shadow resisted the very powerful urge to groan. Okay, so maybe a simpler, broader approach was in demand. Pointing to Buck, he continued. "All mobians contain some small measure of chaos energy, similar to a being's natural electricity. It's a piece of the fabric of the universe. Some beings are able to hold more and utilize it in various forms. Sonic has been able to achieve his speed partly because of it, being exposed to large amounts of chaos energy through the emeralds." He then gestured towards Scarfz, "His chaos energy supply is low, as if he's been fighting or using his speed nonstop."

"He's been eating and sleeping a lot in the past few weeks." Amy frowned.

"Has he snuck off during the night to do anything?" Shadow probed the air with his own chaos again, feeling out the edges of the sleeping hedgehog's energy.

"We didn't actually start monitoring him until about three days ago."

Tails muttered, pinching and adjusting the fabric of his gloves. And that was one of the primary reasons the fox was in such a foul mood, wasn't it? How much could this have been helped, had they been more attentive? The answers all varied in their hypothetical response and left him feeling ragged and guilty. Sure, Sonic was never the kind of guy to hog the attention, more likely to downplay his pain than call attention to it, but this was something they *knew* about him

Tails dragged a hand over his face, staring angrily at the wall. Every answer brought more questions. They finally had the other hedgehogs here but it was as if they'd just sprinted headlong into another wall. If they weren't able to reverse whatever was happening then Sonic would run out of energy and-

He screwed his eyes shut against the thought. Sonic wouldn't give up. He would keep going. He had to keep going.

"Hey little buddy," It was Buck's voice that reached out to him, the hedgehog giving the fox such a kind look, unable to see his little brother hurt no matter the dimension, though the drastic differences in height doing little to mar the sight. A sharp prickling started at his back eyes, but Tails bit his tongue. "He's Sonic too. He's going to be okay." And it shouldn't have soothed him so much, but it did. When Tails and his Sonic had first met, long before they'd settled near the village, it'd been a daunting task. Orphans were unfortunately commonplace, large amounts of families displaced from the remains of the war. So much of their childhood had been spent on just surviving, but Tails had nothing but fondness for even the harshest of days, because all it took was his brother's smile, so similar to the one the Buck was giving him right now, and an assurance that thing's were going to be okay. Tails nodded firmly, that old spark lighting in dull eyes once more, finally returning Buck's smile hesitantly.

Buck turned back to the rest of the group. "So, we just have to put some juice back in him. Anything we can use to do that?"

A silence fell. Then...

"Sonic." The black hedgehog's voice caught their attention, his gaze bright with an idea. "You said the kid was like a - " Sonic practically buzzed in place as he caught on to Shadow's idea.

" *Generator."* They finished the sentence together, the excitement palpable and almost out of place in the desolate atmosphere.

Wachowski blinked as red and green eyes turned to him, feeling very

much like a spotlight was being aimed at him. He swallowed, cracking a nervous smile.

The rundown was as quick and efficient as Buck could manage. Wachowski listened as the two told him in disjointed sentences that he was the most natural consumer and producer of chaos energy they had ever come across outside of a chaos emerald. When his Tails had arrived on his earth he'd mentioned something like chaos energy, but it didn't seem terribly important at the time, overshadowed by the presence of someone from back home. Talk of generators, emeralds, and power flew straight over his head, but the "you make chaos energy" thing was straightforward enough.

"Think you can do it?"

"Uh," Wachowski screwed up his face in concentration, running over the words once more. "So I just touch him?" That wouldn't be too bad. And if it would help Scarfz feel better, it was hardly a chore.

"More or less." Shadow nodded patiently. "Ideally, I'd teach you how to channel your own chaos energy towards him, but his body is so starved for it that even some ambient exposure should help him."

The younger hedgehog nodded, making his way towards the center of the room. Multiple pairs of eyes were on him, expectant. He'd be lying if he said he knew exactly what to do, the energy that generated from his body wasn't something he could accurately control as of yet, but his friend was hurting. One way or another, he'd make it work.

Even through the gloves, he could feel the clammy coolness of the Scarfz's hands, fingers limp. Wachowski settled carefully onto the bed, mindful to not jostle any wires. For a moment, nothing happened. Closing his eyes, Wachowski tried to settle himself, feeling around for the energy that naturally crackled out in excess. It was a still, expansive pool of unknown depths, something that bubbled over when his emotions ran high, crackled out in the form of blue electricity arcing along his body. It was pure moving *life* , volatile, raw and unpredictable.

He could hardly comprehend what he was doing, let alone find any words to explain it. For years, it had been something to either suppress or control, but Wachowski honed in on the purpose of this exercise, letting the direction sharpen his intent. Dipping deep into the depths of the pool, he pushed it through his body, down through his arms and hands, towards the figure he was gently holding onto. It moved sluggishly, tendrils stretching out as if to cling to the expanse, reluctant to leave the source of its host. Still, he urged it forward. Behind him, he could hear the faint tap of metal shoes and two voices whispering fiercely. Wachowski shoved the noise out before it could distract him. The tether was so delicate, so unknown. Brow furrowed in concentration, he focused on diving *deeper* into the pool, opening the channel of the flow to speed up the process-

A hand pressed firmly on his shoulder startling him and breaking the tenuous connection. The clear image of the pool vanished from his grasp, little more than smoke now. He turned to see Buck, a kind, careful smile arranged on his face.

“You did an amazing job kiddo,” The older hedgehog nodded towards the bed and Wachowski turned to see Scarfz. Whatever he’d done had worked out, Scarfz was breathing evenly and the pained expression had soothed out into a restful one, even the deep bags under his eyes seemed slightly less pronounced than before. Besides the IV and ragged look his fur kept, one would be able to believe he was sleeping.

“Oh,” Wachowski breathed, suddenly feeling very lightheaded. “That’s good-” He felt his body slump back against his will, a firm hand keeping from collapsing on the floor.

“Yeah,” Buck chuckled, patting his back. “Shads said you might overdo it.” He looked back at Eggman expectantly.

“His vitals are stabilizing.” The doctor nodded to the new readings, satisfied.

“How come he isn’t waking up then?” Amy asked, she fluttered around the edges of the bed, as if wanting to get too close but afraid to do so. How was it that the kid could just touch him and it’d work out? Even with the hectic explanation of ‘chaos energy’ it didn’t make sense.

“Wachowski only supplemented your Sonic with chaos energy,” Shadow explained. “That doesn’t erase the fact that he’s still being drained. But he should have been able to absorb the ambient chaos

energy - ” The words were bitten off abruptly, crimson eyes wide as he realized what it was that had felt odd ever since they’d arrived. Wachowski’s world had practically hummed with chaos energy, the landscape no doubt invigorated by the speedster’s presence. Here however...

“Shadow? Kinda cut off there, bud - ” But a gloved hand raised up to silence him, Shadow’s head cocked as if he was listening for something.

“Shut up.” Buck frowned.

“Dude, that’s rude-”

“Sonic, *shut up* .” Something in the dark hedgehog’s voice made him listen, ringing a small alarm for something that he simply hadn’t caught onto yet, but Shadow had. The black hedgehog finally straightened, eyes dark and serious. “There’s no chaos energy,” he announced. Sonic waited for the other shoe to drop, but when Shadow remained silent, he snorted.

“Yeah Shads, that’s why we had Wachowski-”

“There’s no chaos energy *anywhere* .” He emphasized, a sweeping arm gesturing to the area around him. For the first time since they had arrived, a touch of uncertainty shadowed his words. This was beyond abnormal, it was straight up impossible, but he could *feel* the ache of its absence. “Try and reach out, try to absorb something from anywhere.”

Frowning again, Sonic did as requested. Chaos skills were something he had to focus on, not having nearly the same knack for it that Shadow possessed. Absorption in particular was an odd skill, partly natural but at the same time hard to grasp. Bodies reacted with the natural chaos energy in the world around them and could, in small increments, draw from it. But drawing in larger amounts consciously was a monumental task that, though possible, was more trouble than it was worth, requiring a skill with energy manipulation few mobians possessed. The Ultimate Lifeform could subsist for a while off the residual energy surrounding him, but Sonic on the other hand had to focus intensely to be able to draw in outside chaos energy. It was hardly necessary most of the time, since the blue hero was such a natural reservoir of the stuff. But as he reached out, probing the air clumsily with his own energy towards the mobians and air surrounding him, he felt an absence. A gaping void that seemed colder

the longer he felt the world through this sense.

There was nothing.

Receding his energy back to himself he turned to Shadow, jaw hardening slightly.

“What’s going on?” Tails had been sufficiently patient, trying to follow their conversation of chaos energy, allowing Wachowski to give his brother chaos energy without stopping to think *what if that’s what’s hurting him* , but he was nearing his limit now.

“I hardly have a working theory,” Shadow began, hesitant. “But two things are certain. Your Sonic is somehow losing chaos energy faster than his body can produce it and there’s no chaos energy to draw from. At all.” The fox massaged his temples, trying to line up the new information.

“Our priorities still haven’t changed, then.” Amy was by his side in an instant. “If he’s stabilized by the energy, like you said then we should get him to a proper doctor who can stabilize his body in the meantime. No offense, Eggman.” She shot the doctor a wry smile. Eggman crossed his arms.

“Very well. I’m not a veterinarian after all.”

“Well, I trust the village as much as I trust Knuckle’s lawyering skills.”

At that moment, Sticks walked in, fur bristling with barely restrained tension. “So there’s another alien, or *alternate Sonic* as you all like to call them.” A spiky blue head peeked out behind her legs, familiar dark eyes landing on them.

“Hey, BB!” Sonic grinned at the other, who signed a quick greeting, before pointing to the bed and raising a brow.

“Uh, yeah sorry, bud. No race night tonight, something’s very wrong with Scarfz and we’re trying to help out as best we can.” BB paused to think for a moment, before looking up and nodding decisively. Being drawn in to help another version of himself was hardly a surprise at this point to the youngest hedgehog of their group, but BB could never leave anyone in need. He waved briefly to Wachowski, who only released Scarfz's hand for the second that it took him to wave back.

“Oh, hey, little guy!” BB rolled his eyes good naturedly, signing something that had Buck gasp and Shadow cough in a rather

suspicious manner. Wachowski frowned, feeling very much like he was missing something. “Aw c’mon that’s not fair BB, you know I don’t know how to sign.”

The short hedgehog smiled widely, before shrugging and turning to see Tails and Amy. The fox was watching them all, expression unreadable.

“Right then,” Buck began, a bit reluctant to take charge in a world that he didn’t belong to. But Scarfz himself was out of commission, and as much as his friends had done up until now, their biggest shortfall would be the lack of knowledge concerning chaos energy. “We’ll need a plan.”

In the end, the best course of action was to split up. The energy Wachowski had fed Scarfz was already bleeding back out into the air like an impending heat death, so Shadow offered to return to Wachowski’s world with the kid and Scarfz. “His world's ambient energy is much richer than this one. That coupled with medical treatment and the supplemental chaos energy from Wachowski would go a long way towards improving his condition.” He’d explained. Buck agreed, deciding to stay behind with BB to try and figure out what was going on.

“I’m going with him.” Tails stated, stepping forward. For a moment, Shadow didn’t say anything and the fox recognized his expression as one who was trying to figure out the best way to word something. Tails set his shoulders, glaring the black hedgehog down.

“I think it might be best if you stayed here, little buddy.” A warm hand fell on his shoulders, familiar and foreign. The urge to take comfort in it and shove it off warred heavily for a moment, before he sagged beneath the weight, defeated. Buck’s voice continued, soothing and soft and so much like his brother’s. “Shadow has chaos-controlled across dimensions twice today, and he’s taking plenty of guests along for the ride. Besides, we’ll need your brains and knowledge of this world to figure out what’s going on.”

“Right.” The fox sighed. In truth, he wasn’t sure how much help he

truly could be. These newcomers knew more about this mysterious energy than they all did *and* were able to stabilize him for the time being. Tails straightened, making a beeline to a set of drawers. “Fine,” he called back, “but before you leave there’s something I need to do.”

“Uh-”

“*Everyone’s* getting swabbed today,” Tails stated, holding the kits in one arm. “I’m not taking any chances on this being contagious or whatever *and* I need a hedgehog baseline to measure Sonic - Scarfz - against.” He added looking at Amy. “Since Gods knows how different genetic makeup can vary across dimensions.”

“Don’t worry, big Tails!” Tails looked down at the smaller Sonic. “My mom’s a doctor! She’ll help him get better real fast! Even faster than me, well, maybe not *that fast* but he’ll be better before you know it! I’m sure y’all will figure something out!” Tails couldn’t help the quirk of a smile at the boy’s optimism and enthusiasm.

There was a strange underlying fear in the younger hedgehog’s eyes, but it disappeared at the sound of Shadow’s groans under the weight of holding up the taller hedgehog. “You coming, Wachowski?”

With a quick “bye”, Wachowski sped back to Shadow, who grasped his shoulder, grumbling under the weight of Scarfz’s draped gracelessly over his arms.

Wachowski felt the world bend around them, expertly manipulated by the dark hedgehog he was holding onto. In a second, they were gone.

“Does anyone else think this is weird.”

Knuckles leaned over to whisper to Amy, watching Buck and Tails discuss possibilities. Buck was shorter than their Sonic, eyes and movements bright despite the severity of the situation. It was a strange sense of deja vu, and they had never met Buck until today.

“So everyone is fine just letting aliens replace our friends?” Sticks asked, shaking a fist in their general direction.

“He’s trying to figure out what’s going on, Sticks.” Amy shoved the badger gently. The badger grumbled, crossing her arms, but she didn’t take her eyes off BB.

“He’s crazy,” she insisted. BB glanced her way, winking mischievously when he caught her gaze.

“Hey, Knux!” Buck and Tails approached the three now, the fox looking doubtful. “You’re the local guardian, right?”

“Uh-”

“Has something happened with the Master Emerald?” Knuckles looked to Tails, confusion written clearly across his face. He scratched his head spines for a moment.

“Sorry, the what now?” And it must have been something funny to say, because BB and Buck stared at him for a beat before bursting into a full-bellied laugh, complete with thrown back heads and guffawing, that lasted a solid thirty seconds. Finally, it tapered to an end.

“Chaos, way to lighten the mood, buddy.” Sonic chuckled, wiping a tear from the corner of his eyes. Knuckles smiled warmly, glad to see some versions of his friend smiling.

“Thanks!”

“So, the Master Emerald?”

“The what now?” Glancing up, Sonic laughed again, hesitant this time.

“Alright Knux, it’s not as funny the second time. Seriously, Master Emerald? Your singular purpose. None of this ring a bell? — Buck rapped his knuckles against his temple — “Did something finally crack that big ol’ skull of yours?”

“Nope.” Knuckles shook his head. “Can’t say I’m too fond of gems.”

“Oh, Chaos.” Sonic pinched the bridge of his nose, wondering briefly if this was how Shadow felt daily when he did something reckless. “Okay,” he turned back to Tails and BB, who had a calculating look on his face. “Ideally, we’d have an echidna with knowledge of the Master Emerald and chaos energy but-”

BB cut him off, snapping his fingers, the proverbial lightbulb flashing over his head. He signed something rapidly.

“On it? Wait, BB what do you mean *on it* - ” But before he could finish the question the short hedgehog brought out a brightly colored gem from his quills —- how it fit there Buck couldn’t tell you — and winked out of existence, distorting the atmosphere for a brief moment. Tails gaped at the spot the other had disappeared from, before turning to Buck incredulously.

“Can *all* of you just do this?”

“Uh,” Buck scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “Sorta, but it’s not as easy as you think. Especially with passengers. But I don’t think he’ll be too long.”

“What’s this about the Master Emerald you were asking Knuckles about?” Amy asked, shivering briefly. The air surrounding the two blue hedgehogs seemed constantly charged with something, the waves sending a shiver down her spine whenever she stayed too close.

“It’s a large, powerful gem. I don’t think I’d call it the source of chaos energy in my world, but it’s a large green gem that controls the chaos emeralds.” The group blinked blankly. “Think the gem that BB just pulled out of his quills but ten times the size. It’s uh - very big, very powerful, I think the embodiment of chaos was trapped inside of it at one point - ”

“How will this help our Sonic?”

“Usually, problems with chaos energy can be figured out through the Master Emerald.” Buck supplemented, but truth was, the Master Emerald was certainly not his area of expertise.

“Let’s make some breakfast.” Amy suggested primly, getting up from her seat. They were only going in circles now, and she was all too aware of how little Tails had eaten recently. Sticks on her side jumped up excitedly.

“I’ll cook!”

“No.” The pink hedgehog answered flatly.

Neither of them had gotten much in the way of rest the past couple of days, so it came as a pleasant surprise when Buck proved himself surprisingly helpful in the kitchen, excitedly informing the pink hedgehog he’d take on half the cooking. It wasn’t that their Sonic wasn’t knowledgeable, but he was more likely to gripe before offering to help. The moment Buck saw the pancake batter however, he took

over with the ease of someone who'd done this many times before.

"It's the only thing I can cook." He explained, beaming at their slack-jawed expressions as he whisked the batter with the air of a professional. In a silver blur, fresh fruit was carefully sliced on a wooden cutting board and smoothly tipped onto a plate. "Tails taught me the first time, boy was that a mess!" The fox at the table perked up slightly at the mention of his other self, expression curious.

"Oh!" Amy appeared completely entranced by the fluffy pancakes Buck piled atop plates, freshly cut fruit arranged on top in a haphazard but still appealing way. "Oh wow." she breathed. And boy, that enamoured expression was familiar. Buck chuckled nervously, clearly recognizing it as well. "Buck, you *have* to teach me! This would be such a hit for Chez Amy!"

"Oh!" Buck's expression cleared quickly, replaced by an eager smile. "Yeah sure, it's not too hard. I only got it down because I went through ten bags of batter the first time."

Even Sticks put aside her strange food to try the pancakes, foregoing all pretense and tearing into them enthusiastically.

"So what do you need to know?" Tails asked, the first plate already gone.

"I guess some general history stuff? I'm not sure how different everything is."

Despite knowing what he'd asked for, Buck nonetheless found himself wishing he'd refined his request as Amy launched into a 'brief recap' as she called it. The planet was also named Mobius, its most recent history had been drenched in a sort of civil war between multiple groups rising and falling throughout the years. The war had begun hundreds of years ago, the exact date unknown but speculated to be over five hundred years old, devolving into guerilla tactics between small groups in the past one hundred years, and seeming to come to a standstill in the last fifty, with no further activity since then. Speaking to them now, Buck might have never guessed that their planet had been in a constant struggle for most of its recent history, but then again the same could apply to him.

"So what groups were involved?" he asked.

"We… aren't sure who all was involved in the war." Amy answered uncertainly. "The echidna tribe was one of the warring parties, but

there were others. They were wrapped up in their fight, all we know is that it wasn't over territory. Attacks took place all over the world."

"So how do you know it was part of that war and not something else?"

"Only recently have studies begun to delve into that. Interconnectedness across countries began to rise to prominence about a century ago, and since most of the warring parties are gone, there's no one to tell their story." Tails added, spearing some of Knuckles unattended pancakes with his fork.

"Gone?" But before Buck could continue asking the question he felt the strange tell-tale prickling of chaos energy, magnified now by the absence in this world. He might have never noticed it if Shadow hadn't pointed it out, but now it was as glaring as someone trying to punch through the very fabric, the imbalance of chaos on both sides amplifying the sensation like ears popping from the pressure.

A loud yell came from the front door before it was thrown open, BB triumphantly swaggering in with a confused and familiar, yet smaller, echidna behind him.

"Why did it take you so long bringing him here then?" Buck asked suspiciously. BB glanced away guiltily, wiping some crumbs from his mouth inconspicuously.

"He caught us in the middle of breakfast, I bribed him." Knuckles explained smugly, ruffling the top of BB's head to the younger one's annoyance. He tensed as he caught sight of the other echidna, violet eyes widening slowly.

"Hey, a mini-me!"

"Oh *hell no.* "

"Wow, this is like looking in a funhouse mirror." The taller Knuckles grinned standing up and looking down at the other, who was *this close* to evening out the height difference. Anyone was shorter without kneecaps.

"You're telling me." He growled out finally, crossing his arms. "I didn't realize a 'quick detour' meant another dimension, Sonic."

"How come you only brought my Knuckles?" Buck asked BB, not that the hedgehog was complaining. Knuckles had had more of… a temper, when they were younger. The Guardian had definitely mellowed out

over the years. BB pulled a face, signing and gesturing some *very* violent looking hand signs. Buck blanched and beside him Knuckles roared in laughter.

“Yikes, okay, guarding his Master Emerald it is.” The taller hedgehog nodded solemnly.

Once they caught Knuckles up to speed (and kept him and his taller self a safe distance from the other) the rest of the group finished up their meal before making their way to the hangar where Tails kept his planes.

“So your Shadow,” Buck began. He watched Tails pull an interesting face, before nodding, encouraging him to continue. “Do you really think a DNA sample from him would help?”

“I do. Sonic and Shadow are the only super sonic hedgehogs I know of. Amy’s strong, but she doesn’t have the speed they do, and her tests didn’t match up at all with Sonic’s.”

“Is her chaos energy being drained as well?” Odd, he hadn’t noticed any inhibitor rings on Scarfz’s Amy when he’d arrived.

Tails shook his head. “No, her energy readings are normal, based on previous scans little has changed. But her DNA and his? Completely different. At first I thought I botched the test. But the second one only showed the same results.”

Buck wondered what his DNA would look like compared to Scarfz. Back home, he knew his readings varied a lot from other mobians and Tails had suggested that this was in part because of his exposure to so much chaos energy, ‘like radiation’ the fox had said cheerfully. Except in a less mutanty way and a way cooler ‘fastest thing alive’ kinda way.

“Do you know how long there hasn’t been any chaos energy?”

“No clue,” the fox shrugged, “before you mentioned it, it wasn’t really something I’d heard of.”

“And you Knux?” Two pairs of violet eyes turned to look at him and Buck winced internally. Yeah, maybe this was going to get confusing. “Uh, taller Knux?”

“I assume you mean lunkhead me.”

“Heh, actually you’re both-”

“Sonic - ”

“Alright, alright,” Buck held up his hands, trying to ward off his friend’s anger.

“I don’t know what chaos energy is, but it *does* sound a little familiar.” The taller Knuckles leaned in, almost overshadowing the other echidna entirely. Buck resisted the urge to sigh, things were truly odd.

“I guess we can work that out later. Let’s go find your Shadster.” Tails perked up at that, a wicked gleam in his eyes that reminded Buck and BB of the more chaotic side of their little brother.

“*Please* call him that.”

A low groan sounded from the couch, grabbing the attention of the two hedgehogs that had just settled Scarfz onto the couch. Wachowski tore across the room, his conversation with Shadow dropped in an instant as his attention turned to the rousing blue figure on his couch. He took the other hedgehog’s hand in his, trying to reach out with his energy like he had earlier, but the tether was too hazy to take hold of.

“Scarfz!” The deep blue hedgehog winced slightly at the sound, body recoiling from the source. “What’s wrong with him?”

“He still requires medical attention, I recommend you bring your doctor here.” Shadow spoke softly, standing awkwardly in the center of the living room. “I’ll keep an eye on him while you’re gone.” He added to Wachowski's hesitant look.

The boy nodded, flashing him a quick smile before he was gone, a whoosh of displaced air rushing in before it was quiet again. Shadow sat on the floor, watching Scarfz intently, poring over the few facts that they did have at the moment. He could. Somewhere in the house, a clock ticked, gently marking the time in the otherwise absolute silence.

A floor above him, there was sudden movement, the sound of nails scrabbling against wood flooring. Shadow jumped to his feet in an

instant, his back towards the couch where Scarfz was resting. The kid had assured that the house would be empty, with both parents away at their respective workplaces, so what the hell was making that sound?

Thundering closer, the heavy footfalls seemed erratic. A golden head peeked around the living room entrance, large soulful eyes blinking curiously at him. Shadow stared back.

The golden monster lunged forward.

Maddie was stepping out of one of the clinic's rooms when a tornado blew into the building. The doors snapped open, creaking on their hinges from the speed and pressure of the force. Some of the nurses shrieked as any paper not held down was scattered in the wake of the sudden wind.

"Mom!"

"Wha - *Sonic?* What are you doing here?" The wind died down, revealing a guilty looking hedgehog in the center of the waiting room. He waved weakly to the nurses who were picking up the papers, zipping around the room to gather them all up before handing them over with a bashful smile.

"Sorry!"

"Weren't you with Buck and the others for the weekend?"

"Oh! Yeah, about that-" Sonic looked like he was trying to figure out how to explain something, shifting his weight from sneaker to sneaker before throwing his hands up in frustration. "Scarfz is really hurt and I sorta helped him with my energy but Eggman said he needed a doctor and you're the only I trust so we brought him here and he really needs help they said something about his kidneys and-"

"Whoa. What, wait." Maddie took a deep breath, "did you say Eggman?"

"Yes? Oh! Uh, not the same one. This one doesn't seem as cuckoo in

the noggin, if you know what I mean." He looped his index finger near his temple, going for a reassuring smile. Maddie looked helplessly towards the staff that had gathered near the front desk, the mini tornado and Sonic no doubt being enough to distract the entire office. The other doctor there waved her hand in a shooing motion.

"Go ahead, Dr. Wachowski. If you need anything, give us a call." That was all permission Sonic needed before he ran to the back and returned, handing Maddie her bag and all but shoving her out the door.

"Let's go! We need to hurry and you're a slow driver!"

"Wha- am not!"

On their way home however, Maddie did indeed drive slowly, as she had to juggle Sonic jumping in and out of the car- something she'd never get used to- and calling her husband to let him know what was going on, even though the finer details still escaped her.

Unsurprisingly, the call went straight to voicemail. The sheriff rarely answered personal calls unless he was in the office.

"Hey honey, just calling to give you a heads up, uh - no Sonic you can talk to him later - there's a bit of a situation. One of Sonic's friends - oh right - his alternate selves, is at our home, needing a doctor. So… we'll see. See you at home! Oh, please pick up some sweet bread for tonight, love." Ending the voicemail, Maddie wondered idly if he'd take it as well as she had the first time she'd met Sonic.

Wachowski found it hard to breathe. Jumping in and out of Maddie's car, sprinting miles into any direction before turning around to rinse and repeat, he repeated to himself over and over that *this* was the reason he couldn't breathe.

Not the image of Scarfz's limp body in Shadow's arms. Not the flickering light that should be burning brightly within him. Biting down on his tongue Wachowski focused on the burst of pain, followed by a faint metallic taste.

Focus Sonic, focus, focus, focus- a sneaker snagged onto a looping root. Wachowski screamed in frustration, body sprawling over the forest floor before finally dragging to a halt. He stayed there, for a moment, breathing heavily. The loam and rustle of leaves around him were the only things he allowed himself to focus on, trying to quell the ragged breathing that had turned into sobbing gasps.

Scarfz was dying.

Shadow had said his energy was somewhat restored but he was *dying* and no one knew why. Buck and BB were off trying to find a solution, Shadow was keeping him safe and he was *here* falling apart because if he lost someone else he-

He held his breath. Holding the pressure as a ward to the rest of the thoughts.

“What are you doing, Sonic.” he muttered into the earth, slowly dragging himself into a sitting position. Rubbing a gloved hand against his eyes, he tried to soothe the pressure that threatened to spill over once more. “Crying is useless, won’t help anyone.”

“Yeah maybe it won’t help anyone but mom said it’s not a *bad* thing.”

“Well it is right now,” he snapped, before letting his shoulders sag.

Rising to his feet once more, Wachowski rubbed at his leg absentmindedly at where the impact of the fall had been strongest. Scarfz was suffering much worse than he was. Blinking back a fresh wave of tears he slapped his face lightly, a bright, rehearsed smile making its way back on, before speeding back to Maddie’s car.

Knuckles couldn’t think of a stranger situation than the one he was currently in. Crammed between his huge alternate self and their Amy, he crossed his arms, cursing the compact design of Tails’ planes. The strange badger with the rasp had stayed behind at the lab, in case the others returned. Below somewhere were Buck and BB, deciding to follow the plane on foot instead of trying to cram into the limited space. The fox cub seemed to forget that sometimes he needed to

transport more than one death defying hedgehog in these contraptions.

“So,” Amy had to raise her voice to be heard over the engine, “has your Sonic ever had something like this happen to him?” The echidna shot her an odd look.

“You mean die slowly from the absorption of his chaos energy?” He snorted. “Something like that happened. But never quite like this.” Knuckles raised his nose to the air, breathing in deeply. “Never in an environment as hostile as this.”

“Hostile?”

“There’s no chaos that I can feel and from the rundown I got, you didn’t notice how bad he was until two days ago.” The echidna shot her a flat stare. Amy flushed, glancing back towards the side of the plane. The fabric of her dress twisted in her hands.

“I… We…” She shook her head. Amy was trying to be strong for Tails and for Sonic, but there was also a selfish reason. “He *told* me he wasn’t feeling well when we went after Eggman. I told him to buck up and quit being lazy.” She admitted quietly. Her eyes felt tight, like there was a pressure building up behind them. “I didn’t even mean to be mean, I just. Expected him to act like he always did.”

Knuckles raised a brow ridge at her but said nothing, knowing that these were words she needed to come to. Their Amy back home had gone through unimaginable odds in order to become the leader she now was. Finding a balance between her single-minded focus and the needs of her friends had been painful to find, but the pink hedgehog had a powerful love for her friends nonetheless. “It’s not my place to judge you, Amy,” he said carefully, seeing her shoulders stiffen, “and feeling bad over choices until now will only block your moving forward. Accept it, move on, and do better.”

The plane droned on in silence for a handful of moments, before Amy turned to give the resistance leader a watery smile. “Thanks, Knux.” she sniffed.

“I gotta say, I’m not really sure of what’s going on.” Knuckles sighed beside him, shifting his large arms closer to himself, making himself smaller. “But if there’s anything we can do, anything *I* can do, it’ll get done.”

The resistance leader couldn’t help the smile that touched his face,

recognizing that spark of determination. Perhaps there *were* some similarities across dimensions. “Spoken like a true echidna.” he huffed, punching the echidna softly in his shoulder.

The taller Knux chuckled, ruffling the tops of his spines.

“Okay, *no.”*

The sun was blazing over the tops of the trees, but in the thicket of the forest it was dark and cool, sunlight filtering gently through the dark leaves and dappling the ground below. Tails had landed the plane in a clearing, insisting they walk the rest of the way. “This Shadow isn’t quite as friendly as yours,” he’d explained, “He’s more of a ‘attack first, gloat later’ kinda guy.”

“Yup, reminds me of when I met Shads myself.” Buck nodded. “Good times.”

“You sure you won’t need any back up?” The resistance leader asked him, crossing his arms. “Who knows how strong this one is.” Buck shook his head, waggling a finger to his friend.

“Nah, we’re good. Between BB and I this should be a cinch. I’ve been fighting Shadow for years now.”

Knuckles seemed unconvinced, but trying to dissuade the hero and his younger self from *anything* was a waste of breath.

“Alright, we’ll wait out here for you.” Buck and BB flashed them a near synchronous wink and thumbs up, before disappearing in a burst of blue.

“Huh.” The taller Knuckles said, leaning on his other self’s head. “They really are faster.”

“Okay, *that’s it!”*

Stealth wasn't nearly as flashy of a skill as super sonic speed, but Buck and by extension BB had always been light on their feet. One of Buck's earliest memories was figuring out how to catch his own food and at times evade larger predators, a light step and control of one's surroundings was imperative. He'd noticed Wachowski had a similar step to his, the kid was boisterous sure, but even during their race when they'd been speeding around the word he could tell.

Beside him, BB rolled forward towards the cave entrance, eyeing it curiously. He turned to sign quickly and Sonic resisted yet another groan as he remembered that his impulsivity had somehow been *worse* as a kid. Abandoning all pretense of sneaking, Buck wearily followed BB into the cool cave.

They hadn't gone further than thirty feet into the cave when Buck froze, the quills on his head rising defensively. There was a tingle of a *familiar* energy-

"Whoa!" BB had grabbed hold of his arm, twisting his body to fling Buck out of the way of a crackling chaos spear. "Thanks buddy!" he grunted, flipping back up, light on his feet. The air crackled with pulses of chaos energy, nothing as powerful as his own Shadow's but formidable nonetheless.

The dark hedgehog stepped forward from the shadows, as if formed from them, his face set into a deep scowl. Buck paused a moment to take in the differences, making sure to point out to his Shads later that not only was Scarfz's Shadow *taller* but he was also rocking some serious quill volume. "Heya, Shadster." He leaned over, fists on his hips, a teasing grin making its way forward. Another crackling bolt of chaos shot towards him, the energy snapping forward, but Buck danced around it effortlessly, the easy smile never leaving his lips.

"Sonic, come to invade my home then?"

"You live here? Jeez Shads, I know times are rough but I thought you had some class."

"How dare - wait a second." The black hedgehog narrowed his eyes as the two figures finally came into view. "What the hell is going on, more of your cheap tricks, Sonic?"

“I’m wounded,” Sonic placed a hand over his heart, looking properly scandalized. BB snickered beside him. Crimson eyes narrowed at both of them, sparks of chaos energy igniting around his person. Buck grinned, knowing exactly what was coming next.

“Your mockery will be the last thing you do.” Shadow blinked out of existence in a quick flash of light. Buck and BB exchanged exasperated, the taller hedgehog focusing on the air around him, waiting for the piercing sensation of chaos to punch through the veil again.

There!

Leaning back into a fluid twist Buck dodged the jet skate that hissed down where his head had been only moments before. In a perfectly synchronized move, BB flew towards Shadow in a spin attack, whirling quills sending the black hedgehog crashing into the cave wall.

Buck would be lying if he said he didn’t want to drag this fight out, see how he fared against another Shadow, but they simply didn’t have the time.

“Okay Shadow,” he pulled the dazed hedgehog up from the rubble, “we need your help and you need to come with us. Don’t chaos control anywhere because I can read where it’s gonna land and I know you can’t go very far.” Finally getting his bearings, Shadow snarled weakly, jerking his arm away

“Were I at full strength I would have destroyed you on sight.”

“Yikes, I really hope you mellow out faster than my Shadow did. This phase is not as cool as I remember. BB, some help?”

The two hedgehogs walked back to the clearing, Shadow between them, sullen and silent.

In a dimension over, another Shadow was having a *trying time* with a golden animal. He was nearly certain it was a dog. Maria had shown

him many images of earth animals during their time on the A.R.K. and insisted that when she was better they would get a dog. But Shadow hadn't realized *how massive these animals were* . The dog met his eyes easily, sitting at the entrance to the living room, standing guard.

Rising slowly to his feet, Shadow considered his options carefully. There was no doubt he was faster than this animal. Dogs were pursuit predators, according to his spotty knowledge, but he had told Wachowski that he'd guard Scarfz.

"Sonic, if your alternate self gets me killed I'll come after you myself." He mumbled. But the dog made no other aggressive mood, panting lightly. Then it got up to and made a beeline towards Shadow.

To his dying day, Shadow would tell anyone he met the animal head on; he had most certainly *not* yelped.

The animal seemed to be focused solely on him, following him whenever he moved. Shadow led the animal away from Scarfz, executing a perfectly calculated and strategic retreat. But despite the short bursts of energy that he managed within the limited area of the house the dog continued his steady chase, padding slowly, keen nose always alerting him to the location of the Ultimate Lifeform.

Shadow jumped down from the banister leading to the second floor, the dog switching course and returning to the first floor. "Oh chaos, it's a pursuit predator."

At that moment, Wachowski strode in, a human woman close behind him. "Actually!" he said brightly, reaching out to greet the monstrous dog as he entered, "both humans and dogs are pursuit predators. They tire faster prey out before going in for the kill. I learned that in school last week!"

Shadow visibly paled, looking between the human woman and the hedgehog.

Chaos forsaken planet , he decided firmly.

Consciousness delivered Scarfz unceremoniously. The moment he began to wake, his senses coming to him slowly, the pain punched through, overpowering anything else.

Remind me to never spar Amy when she makes hammer upgrades.

But that wasn't quite it, was it? The memory of the past day was foggy, his brain sluggishly processing the here and now first. His torso ached, the pain digging deeper than muscle soreness and bruising. Voices filtered in, gentle but at the same time so jarring.

"Honey, go get your friend." The sound of feet pattering away, quickly, far too quick for it to be any of his friends. A palm, warm and smooth, gently pressed down on his shoulders from where he was trying to sit up. They were *human hands* . He shot an arm out, pushing them away and tried to force his eyes to open but his body refused to obey. The human huffed softly as if mildly annoyed as his palm hit something solid. "It's okay, you're safe. Lay back now."

He couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was about the woman's voice that soothed him so much, it wasn't even familiar, but it was smooth and motherly and blurred out the edges of his rising panic. Slowly, Scarfz managed to open his eyes, blinking against the bright light. The noise of someone moving, curtains being drawn, and the muted burn of the light was gone.

A human was looking down at him from above, a woman. The mounting panic made a quick return until a familiar blue figure entered the room. Scarfz let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, glancing nervously between the woman and kid.

"Heya, kiddo," he smiled as smoothly as he could. Wachowski lit up like a beam, zipping over to stand beside the couch.

"Geez Scarfz," he laughed, poking at an errant quill, "you look rough."

Before Scarfz could offer any quip back he saw yet *another* familiar figure, this one not quite so comforting.

"Shadow, gotta wait for me to get sick so you can take down your foe, huh?" He gripped the blanket that was draped over him, tensing to move into action. Gods, they'd removed his *shoes,* how was he supposed to run? But instead of scowling deeper or saying something hilariously trite Shadow's face screwed up in confusion.

"Wrong hedgehog." He said finally, moving to a different corner of the

room as a golden animal padded in. A dog, a golden retriever if he wasn't mistaken.

"Oh." He turned to Wachowski. "This one yours?"

" *No!* " At Wachowski's and Shadow's vehement denial Scarfz couldn't help the burst of laughter, immediately wincing afterward.

"Mom said you'd need to take it careful," Wachowski said, glancing up at the human woman. She nodded sagely, ruffling the top of his head in a gesture so gentle he had to look away for a brief moment. Smiling, the woman adjusted a tube that seemed to lead to his arm.

"Just call me Maddie."

"How are you feeling?" Wachowski all but climbed onto the couch, eyes wide in concern.

"Just a little banged up," Scarfz lied easily with a wink. Maddie gave him a sharp look but thankfully added nothing further. In truth, his body was still alight with pain. The last thing he remembered was collapsing trying to reach his friends while they went to see Eggman, the dull ache in his torso had shifted into throbbing agony so great he hadn't been able to scream as his face met the dirt, slipping into unconsciousness soon after.

"Here." Wachowski reached out and took his hand, brow furrowed in concentration. It was a sweet gesture, really, but Scarfz was confused.

"Uh, thanks buddy. But you don't need to hold my hand."

"Shadow said you were low on energy and I have a lot of it!"

"A bit more complicated than that, but in essence, yes." Shadow added from the corner, having moved yet again. "Your chaos energy was drained, which for Sonic generally, can be fatal. Wachowski holds a lot, so he's been sharing with you." The dog approached Shadow again, sniffing curiously. Shadow promptly turned on his heel and moved across the room, the animal following at a slower pace.

"Oh," He'd heard the others mention chaos energy on and off again throughout their interactions, but it wasn't something that had applied to him, so most of the mumbo jumbo was lost on him. "I guess," he shook himself a bit. "I guess I do feel much less exhausted, now that I think about it."

“That’s good,” Shadow nodded reassuringly, rounding the other couch only to change directions when the animal peeked out from behind. “Once you’re stabilized we can see what progress the others have made on a permanent solution.”

“Give me the verdict, Doc,” Scarfz coughed dramatically, Wachowski’s hand never letting go of his own. “How bad is it?”

“Ah, good to see the humor is just as awful in your alternate selves.” Maddie laughed, brushing the fur on the top of his head, even though there was nothing in the way. The gesture was soft, familiar, and affectionate. Scarfz coughed again, embarrassed, causing Maddie to blink and pull back. “Sorry,” she smiled sheepishly, “I didn’t mean to overstep.”

“It’s fine,” His attempt at a cool shrug off was ruined by the small crack in his voice. *Gods, he was so lame.* “It’s fine,” he tried again.

A loud sound startled all four, heavy steps approaching them rapidly. Around the corner a human man rushed in, eyes scanning the room sharply, posture relaxing once he saw whatever he’d been looking for.

“Welcome home, Donut Lord.” Behind Wachowski, Shadow’s brow twitched as he realized this was likely the kid’s dad.

Brief introductions were made between the hedgehogs and new humans and Scarfz quietly marvelled at the ease between Wachowski and his parents. “Donut Lord”, whose actual name was Tom, was pretty accepting of the whole situation. When Tom swept Wachowski up onto his shoulders, much like Scarfz had taken to doing before all of this, the kid simply *glowed* with happiness. He felt like he was watching through a strange mirror a life that might have been his, had the wheels of fate turned differently. But, they were, in a sense, weren’t they? Scarfz smiled at them, swallowing down his sadness. His own story, and Buck and BB’s as well, was best left unshared. They had all found their own family, in one way or another, that was enough. It had to be.

Wachowski insisted on sharing his favorite meal with his guests, ignoring Shadow’s dramatic groan when he asked Maddie if she could make chili dogs for them.

Tom and Maddie left the room to prepare dinner while Shadow was chased out of the living room in a rather undignified manner by the curious dog, followed by Wachowski yelling after the two (“He’s just curious Shadow!”). Scarfz decided to try and walk while Maddie was

in the kitchen. The needle on the back of his hand was uncomfortable but he left it in, hoping that it wasn't as large as it looked.

He wasn't alone for long. Shadow walked back into the living room having apparently escaped the dog. He gave the struggling hedgehog a flat stare. "Seriously?"

"I'm tired of laying down, dude! You gonna tell on me?" He joked, carefully holding onto the bag of fluid. Shadow snorted, walking over to help.

"If you end up falling on the floor, the kid would probably blame me." Scarfz chuckled. It was kinda freaky how chill this Shadow was. Maybe his Shadow could take some lessons But he accepted the help, using the black hedgehog as leverage to stand shakily.

"There! That wasn't so bad!"

"You're leaning half your body weight on me."

"So what? Just yesterday I could barely move. This is progress." Shadow rolled his eyes, but said nothing more. It was true. The blue hedgehog still looked like a ragdoll someone had tossed into a shredder then glued back together, but he was awake and alert.

The commotion that met them both when they entered the kitchen nearly caused Scarfz to lose his precarious balance, but he smiled brightly once he realized it was a cheer from Wachowski.

"You *shouldn't* be out of bed," Maddie fluttered around him briefly, "but I'm glad to see you can walk."

"No worries, Shadow, I got this." Wachowski hopped down from the counter lightly, taking Shadow's place as Scarfz's walking aid. "And I let Ozzie outside, so he doesn't make you nervous."

"I *wasn't* nervous," but at Wachowski's grin he just shut his mouth, knowing every word only dug him deeper. Wachowski took Scarfz's hand, concentrating. Ever since Shadow had given him a brief rundown on how to control and share his energy he'd made it a point to steadily pass a stream to Scarfz whenever they were close, like right now. Wachowski initially had to fight to not let the strain show on his face, but the practice and limit of the stream made it easier.

Dinner was a strange affair. Shadow was stiff and silent beside him, eating in a quick manner that belied his discomfort in the strange

situation. And it was certainly strange; Tom, Maddie and Wachowski clearly had a rhythm they'd fallen into and it was fascinating to watch. Maddie had prepared the food and was giving them orders to set the table, moving around her husband — who had taken to dipping a spoon in the chili — and dropping plates into seemingly empty air before Wachowski caught them deftly, placing them at the table. All the while, Tom was insisting that he *was* settling the table and couldn't Maddie see the great service he was offering by ensuring the chili was safe?

Scarfz burst out in a short laugh at one particularly terrible pun, Wachowski's groan punctuating the punchline.

"Dad, please no."

"Hey, y'know what they say Sonic, if you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen!" Even Scarfz joined Maddie and Wachowski in groaning at the overused phrase while Tom dissolved into laughter.

Wachowski polished off his plate before anyone else, the kid's cooperation throughout the remainder of dinner bought only by the promise that yes, he could show Scarfz and Shadow his favorite movies after dinner and *yes* they'd buy a box of donuts for the impromptu movie night.

Scarfz finished not long after, the kid's hand already outstretched to take his, babbling on about the best actor of all time (a "key - anoo" of some sorts). And despite feeling better than he had in days, Scarfz took the hand, smiling widely at him the entire time, the warm bubbling air of the family's ease and laughter flushing his chest with a comfort he'd never known. Even Shadow appeared more at ease. Well as at ease as Scarfz had ever seen a cranky black hedgehog be. But he all but melted by his standards for the boy.

As he fell asleep that night, Wachowski refused to leave his side, insisting that he was 'on duty'. Scarfz rolled his eyes good naturedly, but shifted enough on the couch to make room for the kid. He was out like a light, snoring lightly against his fur, but Scarfz couldn't find it in him to mind. Sleep came for him soon after, the pain hardly a second thought.

“Are they asleep?”

Shadow peered into the dark living room, enhanced eyes able to easily make out the forms of Scarfz and Wachowski snoozing peacefully on the couch. He turned back to the woman, nodding once.

“Good,” Tom gestured back towards the porch, shutting off the main kitchen light. “I believe we need to talk.”

Shadow nodded stiffly, but eyed the porch with uncertainty.

“I’ll bring Ozzie inside.” Maddie told him carefully, “he usually sleeps with Sonic anyway.”

Outside, the air was warm and dry speckled with the noise of forest wildlife not too far from their backyard. Shadow took a seat across from the couple, watching them try and ease their way into what was no doubt going to be an odd conversation at best.

“We know about the other Sonics,” Maddie began uncertainly, “Sonic- uh, Wachowski- filled us in. It was hard to understand but after having a super powered hedgehog and subsequent flying fox join our family it wasn’t the *craziest* thing as of yet…”

“But it was pretty up there!” Tom added, leaning forward on his knees. “What we don’t get, is what’s going on with Scarfz back there.” Shadow pursed his lips, before launching into an explanation.

The concept of chaos energy wasn’t as hard to explain. Humans and other animals already held certain levels of electricity in their bodies, but chaos energy was much more intricate. Mobians like him and Sonic relied on it by design or necessity, in Sonic’s case.

“So… is our Sonic at risk for whatever Scarfz has?” Maddie asked, steeled already for the worst answer, the shine in her eyes betraying her fear.

“No,” Shadow said firmly. “Wachowski is a natural generator of chaos energy. I don’t know how that is possible,” he tacked on in preparation for their question, “but it means that he’s a natural source of chaos energy, so even if the chaos energy of this world was drained

he wouldn't be affected in the same way."

"And how can a world be drained of chaos energy?"

"I don't know." Shadow admitted. "It's like nothing I've ever seen. And from my observations, it's not the natural state of his world either. Chaos beings living in a world without chaos? It doesn't add up."

"So what will happen tomorrow?" Tom asked this time. In truth, Shadow would have liked to return immediately. But Scarfz had truly seemed to fare better now with Wachowski's help, the surrounding chaos energy, and the company and food of the family.

"We'll have to return to Scarfz's world, keeping him here for too long could have disastrous consequences," he caught sight of the couple's poorly masked crestfallen look, "but we can leave in the evening. I doubt my world's Sonic will have made much progress."

Maddie smiled then at him, soft and thankful. "Thank you, Shadow."

The rest of their questions were relatively simple ones that he answered with ease. Finally, when Maddie stifled a yawn they retired inside.

"Will you be sleeping with the boys?" Tom asked, holding the door open. But Shadow only shook his head.

"I'll remain out here, if that's okay. I need less sleep than normal Mobians." For a moment, Maddie seemed like she wanted to argue with him, before nodding.

"If you're sure, but we'll leave the door unlocked for you. Just let yourself in."

With that, they slipped inside, the sounds of the night filling the space once more.

On the way back to Tails' lab Shadow had said very little, ignoring friendly and hostile greetings alike. Buck didn't really expect him to

run off, not after he'd strategically goaded the hedgehog with the suggestion that they might be able to help him with his own energy drainage. It wasn't a total lie. Buck may not have been as skilled as his own Shadow at reading chaos energy, but something was very wrong with this Shadow.

"And why do you need my DNA?" he had asked, alarmed, once they explained exactly why they had asked him to come.

"Something is wrong with Scarfz-"

" *Who?!"*

"Your Sonic!" Buck threw his hands up, exasperated. "He's very sick. There's something wrong with your chaos energies but whatever is happening to him is *killing* him and if Tails said your DNA will help then that's what we need."

Shadow narrowed his eyes, looking both at Buck and BB for any trace of a lie. He found none, but couldn't trust in them so easily nonetheless. "Why should I care about what happens to him?"

"Because," Buck took a step forward, gaze nearly a glare now, "I know that you have never been a bad guy, Shads."

"You don't know me."

"I know enough, Shadow." Buck rocked back on his heels, giving the angry hedgehog some room. "Will you help?" For a long moment, Shadow was silent, having some silent argument in his own head while he stared the smaller hedgehog down. Tails and Amy exchanged an uneasy glance, wondering what they'd do if Shadow really refused to help, but Buck looked entirely at ease, as if he knew how this would all play out. Beside him however, BB vibrated with an almost *dangerous* energy, staring up at Shadow with a smile that was more threat than anything.

"Fine." Shadow muttered, finally. "But this is only so that I'm the one who crushes him." BB rolled his eyes so hard they nearly fell out of his head. Buck only quirked a smile, having expected nothing less.

"Attaboy, Shadster."

"Call me that one more time and I'll-

"Yeah, yeah, end my bloodline or whatever. C'mon let's get those

samples.”

Completely ignoring whenever the hedgehog’s teeth nearly clamped around his fingers when he’d gotten particularly close, Tails eventually managed to obtain the DNA sample from Shadow in an almost brusque manner.

Everyone huddled around Tails as he punched commands into the computer, the samples already fed into it. Even Shadow tensed when the machine dinged, the comical sound belying the apprehension in the room. The fox reached over, snatching the printed paper, folding it out.

Tails froze.

“And? Tails?” There was a slight catch in Buck’s voice the others couldn’t place. Buck had spent the majority of his fighting years with his younger brother. With a mind greater as a child than many would achieve in their lifetime there was little that would stump the natural curious nature of the fox. Every query was a challenge, every dead end was only a wall to crash through, so seeing the quiet agony in those inquisitive blue eyes worried him more than anything so far had.

“They don’t match.”

Amy blinked. “... *What?* ”

“I ran Shadow and Sonic’s DNA against Amy’s and my own and even everyone else’s-”

“Wait but that’s normal right?” Knuckles asked, the resistance leader crossing his arms. “You aren’t related or even the same species-” But Tails was already shaking his head.

“That’s not it. Even different species share *some* similarities but theirs-” Tails swiveled back to the rest of the group. “They don't match *anything* .”

Chapter End Notes

Additional thanks to fourth-chaos-baby and Ren, y'all are amazing and your ideas keep growing this world that I've fallen in love with.

If y'all have any theories I'd love to hear them, come yell at me on

tumblr at moralitas!

Deus Absconditus

Chapter Summary

The team learns more about this strange world.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This is a godless land. Aren't you tired? Don't you want to go home?

Scarfz' eyes snapped open, the early morning sun peeking in gently through the curtains. The voice… the dream, whatever it had been, was replaced by the faraway trill of morning birds. It took him a moment to remember where he was, the pieces clicking into place as he recognized the soft snoring that came from beside him. Wachowski was curled up beside him, expression peaceful.

"Oh right." He dragged a hand over his face, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. A quick assessment of his body let him know the soreness was still there, but nothing like the stabbing pain of the days before. A subtle movement from the corner of the room startled him, and he tensed before recognizing it as Shadow.

"You need a bell," he scoffed, treated to an annoyed glare from the hedgehog as he shifted, only to find that Wachowski whimpered softly, curling closer. At the sight, Scarfz resolved to never move again.

"You seem to be in better spirits," the black hedgehog commented quietly, glancing briefly at Wachowski. "Your energy seems higher today as well."

Scarfz only shrugged. The explanation he'd been given the other day on chaos energy had gone in one ear and out the other. He was able to grasp the basics of it, but Buck's Shadow having a special insight to his energy was a bit odd. "Just needed a good night's sleep I guess."

Shadow gave him a flat 'really?' look before rolling his eyes, all too familiar with the casual affect blue hedgehogs adopted when faced with danger. "Well good." He'd allow the other to shrug it off, for now. "We're heading back to your dimension after midday. Hopefully we'll arrive to some good news."

Scarfz beamed then, confident. “No worries, between two mes and Tails the whole thing will be taken care of, easy peasy.”

“That’s impossible,” Knuckles said flatly. He tugged the paper out of Tails’ hands eyeing it once more. “You’re telling us Sticks was *right?”*

“It happens a lot more often than you think,” the badger rasped calmly, examining her nails. But anyone could see the excitement rippling beneath her fur, eyes darting between Shadow, Buck and BB.

“Okay, okay, let’s just think rationally for a moment.” Amy massaged her temples, glaring at the floor. “Buck, BB, does your DNA match back home? Like, do you belong there?”

Buck nodded, face scrunching in concentration “As far as I know yeah, up til recently. Tails told me there’d been some changes to it due to chaos energy exposure, but I don’t think it was rewritten entirely. Even Shads and I share some similarities since he’s part Mobian and all that.” From across the room, Scarfz’s Shadow shot him an odd stare, a faint look of contemplation settling across his features.

“Do Shadow and Scarfz match?” The pink hedgehog took the paper from Knuckles, the resistance leader begrudgingly allowing it. “You said he doesn’t match ours but maybe-”

“They have similarities, yes.”

“Okay! That’s good then! Finally, some good news.” Shadow snorted at that.

“There’s little good about being compared to that buffoon.” Buck only rolled his eyes, a bit exasperated. Every other word from this Shadow’s mouth seemed to be ‘bufoon’ this or ‘fool’ that. Surely Shads had been a bit more creative than this all those years ago?

“Honestly, I’m not sure if that clears up anything Amy.” Tails sighed, his namesakes flicking tensely behind him. “They still don’t match anything. By these results they’re essentially a different race entirely.”

“It’s *something,* Tails!” She insisted, the paper crumpling beneath her fingers.

“What, that Sonic is an alien?” He raised a brow incredulously.

“Isn’t that what the data so far has been pointing towards?”

“It’s just a theory right now.”

“Is that the wildest thing to happen here? Because,” Buck jabbed a thumb behind him, gesturing vaguely at where Wachowski had stood only a day prior, “that kid is an alien to his current home. And BB and I have traveled interdimensionally.”

“Tails,” Sticks gasped, managing to look suitably heartbroken and disappointed. “Do you not believe in life beyond our planet?” The fox scoffed, suddenly looking put upon.

“Look, I’m just saying it’s *unlikely* -”

“He makes a terrible scientist,” One of the Knuckles whispered. But they both flinched as the fox whirled on them, glaring absolute daggers at the two.

“*Come again?* ”

“Don’t pay any attention to them Tails,” Amy placated, patting his back softly.

The fox huffed (muttering to himself that was “more of an engineer than a scientist”) moving towards his workbench and gesturing for the others to follow.

“Look I’m not sure exactly how chaos energy works or Sonic’s body for that matter, his readings have always been all over the place once he finally let me take them.” Tails muttered, spreading out some papers across an already cluttered desk. “But what I *did* notice that I missed before, was that there was another big change after he visited your dimension.”

Buck frowned, looking over the papers. They were close to nonsense to him, honestly, but he implicitly trusted any version of his brother.

“It turns out that his consumption of chaos energy jumped *exponentially* after he visited your dimension. I didn’t know what to look for initially but with your Knuckles’ help I was able to fine tune some equipment and look,” he pointed to two different papers, bringing them together, “He barely used up any prior to going to yours, and when he came back,” the graph spiked “boom, a jump.” He

looked at Buck, eyes burning bright with the discovery. “Something caused a spike in consumption and when he came back there was no chaos energy for him to take, so he just burned through what he had.”

“He did say he had broken his speed record during our race around our planet.” Buck muttered, thinking back on how lively and ecstatic the other hedgehog had seemed. “And when we visited for movie night,” he said slowly, mind crawling towards another realization, “he said he was a little sick, he already wasn’t looking too great but around us he perked up so much, as if he hadn’t been sick.” It had been right there, staring at them in the face the entire time. Tails blanched, apparently realizing as well.

“He was absorbing your residual energy,” the fox muttered, “and when it was gone he began to starve.” Knuckles nodded beside him sharply.

“Chaos is something the body becomes accustomed to. Bodies that need more can suffer fatally if it’s suddenly cut away.”

“But he was fine for fifteen years here.”

“Tails said his energy consumption spiked exponentially, didn’t he?” Knuckles asked, pointing towards the same graph. “If his body grew up weaned off of chaos he would have survived, being exposed to so much in our world kick started dormant consumption by the looks of it. Hence the speed.” he trailed off, adding after a moment, “and the illness.”

“So it wasn’t our world, specifically.” Buck asked wearily. He just wanted to know it wasn’t his fault that Scarfz was like this.

“Chaos energy seems to be neutral on his own. And none of you so far have had any trouble visiting other worlds, so I highly doubt it.”

“Is it a hedgehog thing then?”

“No.” Tails shook his head. “Amy hasn’t shown any signs of it and she’s also been exposed to chaos energy”.

“Shadow?” As Buck asked, everyone’s eyes flicked to the dark figure at the edge of the room. Shadow had been strangely silent, offering a glare to anyone who walked too close, but otherwise saying nothing.

Tails paused, trailing off into deep thought. Buck had told him that Shadow wasn’t at full power, offhandedly mentioning how much

easier it was to overpower this version of the brooding hedgehog as opposed to his own.

“Somewhat, but Shadow’s signs aren’t as drastic as Sonic’s- uh Scarfz. But according to his energy readings,” the sound of rustling papers filled the air, some of them fluttering from the crammed table and toppling to the floor, “here! According to these he *is* losing energy,” Tails squinted at the sheet, “but nothing like Scarfz is. If they’re similar species it makes sense he’s affected less than Scarfz.”

“So we know what’s happening,” Amy joined them, glancing quickly at the papers. “We need to figure out how to stop it.”

“I can take a look at your Master Emerald,” Knuckles offered and Buck winced, scratching his quills nervously. The proud guardian was *not* going to take this well.

“Uh, about that…

Knuckles all but wailed into the air, his groaning exacerbated by Buck’s attempts to calm him down and BB’s snickering.

“That’s impossible!” he exclaimed, crossing his arm. “A Knuckles who doesn’t know about the Emerald is one thing but no Master Emerald? Ridiculous.” And when Buck levelled an incredulous stare to his friend however, he got no further clarification. The blue hedgehog shrugged off the doubts. Knuckles had some weird connection with the Master Emerald, understood it on a level no one else was able to match. Buck would take his hope where he could find it.

“Hey Knux!” The taller Knuckles had taken up the spot beside Tails’ work bench, sitting cross legged.

“Hm? What’s up?”

“Is there an Angel Island here?”

The red echidna beamed, hopping lightly to his feet. “Of course!” Buck couldn’t help his own grin. Finally! Some good news.

“Any chance you can take us there?”

“Sure! I’m not sure I completely remember the way back but it shouldn’t be too hard to find, right?” Modern smiled, a little unsure. His Knuckles on the other hand balked, a fit building up inside like a pressure cooker.

What the hell does he mean he doesn’t know the way back? He fumed. That was ridiculous! Angel Island was supposed to be their home, the place they always returned to.

BB must have noticed his reaction as he nudged his older self slightly, pointing not so subtly at the shorter echidna who was somehow growing even redder in the face.

Buck moved quickly.

“Right.” He grabbed the two, gesturing for Tails and Amy to start the plane, pushing both Knuckles towards the hanger. “No talk just fly right now right this moment.”

It turned out that this particular Angel Island was *not* flying hundreds of feet in the air, but located in a rather secluded part of the ocean like a proper island. Buck, BB and Knuckles couldn’t help but gawk at the sight as Tails’ plane approached the landmass, which somehow managed to look awkward sitting in the ocean.

“You guys act like you haven’t seen an island before.” Tails chuckled. That level of shock wasn’t one he was used to seeing on his brother, even a different version of him. It reminded him of when they first met, Tails so young and trying hard to just stick with his best chance at survival.

“No, it’s just. This is a bit different from back home.” Buck murmured faintly. The fox raised a brow at the hero’s tone but didn’t push any further, turning his attention instead to the controls. They had to start their descent soon.

“So Knux,” Buck asked, after some rude prodding from BB, “How come you don’t come back here more often? Amy said you stay in the village full time?”

“Oh, well I live there.” he said, oblivious to his counterpart sinking

deeper into his seat angrily. “Me and Amy had moved there not long after we met Sonic and Tails. Met her on my way to the coast. It was the safest village any of us had been in, so we stayed.”

BB shot him a curious look, remembering stories Scarfz had told them about the village and the weekly attacks from Dr. Eggman. Even if the doctor was not nearly as murderous as their own, the village wasn’t exactly a ‘safe’ environment by conventional standards.

“Eggman’s a menace,” Knuckles shrugged, “but the further from a city you are the more dangerous it is. Bandit groups aren’t as big an issue, but people still encounter them. Eggman’s just flashy, those other guys are straight up trouble.”

“We only meant to help out the first time we got here, so they didn’t run us out. Eventually, we all decided to just stay.” Amy finished, thumbing one of her quills in thought, “It’s not uncommon for villages to have a small group of fighters. They can’t always afford a big, skilled police force.”

“Man, and the village’s police force is anything but skilled.” Tails chimed in from the pilot’s seat. “When they banished Scarfz they had to rely on stern stares to keep him from slipping back in.”

Knuckles and Buck exchanged a glance as the group of friends laughed at the memory but that… didn’t sit well with Buck at all. But he had to remind himself that this wasn’t his world. And Scarfz’ friends seemed ok with the situation.

It must be a common arrangement , he figured, resolving nonetheless to talk to the other hedgehog once all this was settled.

“So Scarfz isn’t from the village?” Knuckles asked the others, stealing a glance at the two blue hedgehogs. Buck and BB might be the only two that shared a history, due to the odd nature of their meeting and subsequent split, but neither of them talked about it much, choosing to look forward instead of back.

Both Amy and the taller Knuckles looked towards Tails then, their own expressions curious as if they were suddenly thinking the same thing: where *had* Scarfz come from?

But the fox only shook his head, tapping his bottom lip as he tried to remember. “I met Sonic when I was really young, maybe four or five… so almost six years ago?

“Where did you meet?” Buck asked BB’s question, wondering the same thing.

“In a forest near another village. I think he was living on his own by then and he helped me out of… a tough situation. After that, I left the orphanage and followed him.” Buck looked away for a moment. It could feel like so long ago, but he remembered thinking of his own Tails, back then hardly more than a kit, as something who’d only slow him down. It wasn’t a truth he enjoyed revisiting now.

“So you don’t know where he came from?” The resistance leader continued, oblivious to his Buck’s discomfort, “any clues?” But Tails only shook his head again, tossing an apologetic look over his shoulder from the pilot’s seat.

“He said he came from another orphanage like me. I never asked beyond that.”

“We’re here!” The taller Knuckles announced merrily as the plane circled the clearing Tails had chosen to land in.

Once closer to the ground he jumped out of the plane easily, the heavy tension that had blanketed the air swept away as the purpose of their trip presented itself. The jungle, deep and green, swayed quietly in the wind rolling off of the slowing propellers

Something about the place felt solemn, a melancholy that swept in with the breeze, old and unknown. Without a word, they set out, the jungle embracing their forms.

Scarz felt a little lighter watching Wachowski burst out into laughter as he ended the story. Even Shadow, perched on top of a couch (Ozzie wasn’t allowed on couches) huffed in what he suspected was amusement.

“You seriously roomed with Eggman?!” Maddie gasped, handing him a mug of hot chocolate as they settled onto the floor beside the couch. Scarfz had offered to get up many times to give them room, but they’d only ignored him, Wachowski being the only one to join him.

“Yeah,” he smiled, feeling the beverage warm his hands through his

gloves, the smell of cocoa and clean linen mingling in the air. “And lemme tell you, he was a *terrible* roommate.”

“I bet,” Maddie giggled, covering her mouth with one hand and reaching out to touch him. The Wachowski’s were so casual with their affection. A touch here, a brush here, a smile shared at every opportunity. He’d never seen anything like it.

“Do you have any more stories?” Wachowski had his own hot cocoa in hand, but he reached out periodically to press a hand to Scarfz’ arm, the energy pulsing warmly.

Before Scarfz could answer however, Tom returned with blankets and pillows for the space he and Maddie had settled into, handing a blanket to a confused Shadow in passing.

“Are we gonna watch this movie or not?” He asked good naturedly, pointing to the dark screen that had gone idle.

“One more!” Wachowski insisted, scooching forward, large eyes eager. Before all of this had happened, he had only been able to see the older hedgehogs periodically. Then Scarfz had gone through that terrible scare...

Seeing him alert, smiling, with some of the brightness returning to his demeanor was startling and the boy couldn’t help but want to draw it out as long as he could.

Chuckling, Scarfz nodded, sipping at his drink while he thought about what adventure he should tell them about next.

“What about a story from your home? Any folk tales?” Maddie suggested. She and Tom knew so little of the planets the other versions of their son came from. The opportunity to learn more, even of a different reality entirely, was too tempting to pass up.

“Folk tale, huh? That’s more up Sticks’ alley, she’s the one who knows all the crazy stories about the pools of chaos, the pantheon, nomadic ghost healers-” he rattled these off carefully, not noticing the widening gaze of his audience.

“Pools of chaos? That sounds so cool!” Wachowski wriggled, not complaining when Maddie took his mug from his excited hands with a fond look. “Are they like healing waters or...” her question trailed off expectantly.

Scarf blinked, looking at them for a moment. “The… pools of chaos? You know… like the beginning of the universe? I thought everyone knew that story.”

“Different universe, honey.” Maddie reminded him gently, nonetheless her interest was piqued. “Are the chaos pools kinda like the big bang?” Scarfz leaned forward, suddenly eager.

“Ok *that* sounds way cooler than some lousy pools.”

“Pools first!” Wachowski nudged him, the prickle of chaos energy rustling his fur slightly.

“Fine fine,” Pausing for a moment, Scarfz sipped from his hot chocolate, trying his best to remember the story Sticks had told them countless times now. It was such an old tale and known by nearly every person he’d met, even if it was only surface level knowledge.

When he’d first heard it it’d been at the orphanage. Before he’d met Tails. The stories told by the matron, a severe but kind woman, were one of the things he willingly remembered of those days. Scarfz did his best to settle into the calm tone she’d slip into during storytimes, fingers settling around the warm base of his mug.

“Before the beginning there were the pools. They were the birthplace of many things, stars, planets, and the unnamed cosmos, but they were also from where Chaos emerged-”

“I thought you didn’t know about chaos energy?”

Scarfz mouth twitched but he bit back the smile. “Chaos is a *who* ,” he clarified, gently flicking Wachowski’s ear. “It has many names and appearances but in the stories he’s always just Chaos. Now, as I was *saying,”* he paused for effect, glaring with mock severity before continuing, “the pools are what everything comes from and where everything will go back into. Light burst from the pools but it was also followed by *darkness* …”

He did his best to weave the story of the pools to his audience, faltering only slightly in the beginning under their rapt attention. It became easier soon after that to fall into the lilting rhythm of the old tale, one so familiar it felt imprinted in his mind.

“The light and dark shared the pools, which were shrouded in a twilight that allowed them to exist peacefully, in balance. It wasn’t until other gods of the pantheon gazed at them with greed, wanting to

steal the source of energy of the universe for their own reasons.” He waggled his fingers dramatically, but Wachowski hardly noticed, immersed in the visuals of golden, glowing pools and shadowy figures.

“Needless to say, Chaos was angry with this. The pools were the birth and resting place of them all, but Chaos had a unique tie to it.They shoved out the gods, exiling them to the furthest reaches of the universe where chaos hadn’t yet reached. With balance restored, Chaos decided to leave the pools,seeking to protect his birthplace He sealed it away, far from prying eyes. And now he wanders the cosmos, making mortals go mad or blessing them as his whims command him. So behave,” he finished cheekily, grinning at Wachowski who seemed entranced, reminding Scarfz so much of himself when he’d been younger, “or the god of chaos might choose to drag you back into the pools before your time.” He waggled his fingers spookily, this time drawing a delighted laugh from Wachowski.

“That is a pretty cool folk story,” Tom admitted, Maddie nodding sagely beside him. Scarfz's only response to the praise was a shrug, but he turned towards the mug of chocolate to better hide the pleased smile that threatened to spread across his face.

“A deal’s a deal then, now show me this fantastic Earth story Wachowski couldn’t stop talking about. That Kee-ah-noo guy better be pretty amazing."

Tails had chosen a clearing on the outskirts of the landmass, the center covered in a dense jungle before giving way to the shrine that sat at the heart of the island. Knuckles began walking confidently towards where he knew the ruins would be back on his own world, brushing past the taller Knuckles before stopping short. The dense forest dropped to a steep cliff that presented a clearer view of the terrain surrounding the central shrine.

As they joined Knuckles at the edge of the cliff, Buck felt a chill run down his spine. “Chaos,” he breathed, eyes widening in horror. “What *happened* .”

The damage on this island was frightening. The city (he couldn’t recall the city being so intact back home) held signs of a massive attack. Crumbled buildings, deep gouges in the earth that had long since

healed, but Knuckles could recognize the markings of the destructive nature of chaos energy anywhere.

“Chaos.” He answered grimly, crossing his arms. “Did he attack your tribe for a war as well?”

The other Knuckles seemed caught off guard by the question, having fallen into silence at the sight of the ruins. “What? No, he was always with us. I don’t remember the stories very well, but we were attacked by the Ancients and their weaponry.” His eyes slid out of focus, remembering something old. “Their sentinels were… abominations.”

Quickly shaking the dark clouds surrounding him, the echidna shrugged and trudged on, leaving a stunned silence in his wake.

The city, or what was left of it, had once been grand. Towering walls and geometric buildings lined the way to the central shrine the resistance leader knew was the Master Emerald’s resting place back on his world. The jungle hadn’t yet claimed the towering structures. They stood defiantly against the onslaught of the greenery, the city encircled by massive pillars that must have held up a wall at some point. Inner sections were dotted with wide open spaces and smaller structures that must have once been homes…

The destruction that marred the grand ruins was jarring. Deep indentations and gouges in the earth from blasts of energy or explosives, the scorch marks in the earth long since covered remained etched into stone, jagged edges smoothed by the passage of time. The taller echidna joined them finally, expression unusually solemn as he took in the destroyed city in the valley.

After living in the village for so long, Knuckles hadn’t expected to feel anything at the sight of the ruins again. The island had always been a topic he’d shied away from, never truly meaning to hide his origins, but not eager to recount them either. And standing in front of them after so many years, able to see the details in a newer light, opened something within him.

“You asked why I left.” He gestured to the land before them, eyes shadowed with an old sadness. “There’s nothing left to live for in a graveyard."

They picked their way through the ruins slowly, the silence hung heavy between them. Buck walked beside his Knuckles, concerned green eyes darting to his friend every now and again.

After the statement from the taller Knuckles after they'd arrived, the resistance leader had stopped any groans or complaints almost immediately, watching his taller counterpart with a contemplative eye. When they began their approach to what had once been grand city walls however, the anticipation had rolled off him in waves.

Craning his neck to get a look at every building they walked by, Amy had to sometimes gently steer Knuckles out of the way of rubble or foliage, much to Buck and BB's amusement. The resistance leader went so far as to detaching himself from the main path to peer into intact buildings.. Compared to the rubble and overgrown jungle that inhabited his own Angel Island, with only a single temple left intact, this was the clearest snapshot into his people and culture that he had encountered, their run in with the Nocturnus Clan not being the best cultural immersion of echidna tribes.

They came to what must have been a town square at some point, the wide open space paved with smooth, pale yellow bricks that had maintained their form and patterns despite the greenery that attempted to push through the larger cracks.

"Wow." Tails breathed, eyes falling on a magnificent basin of water at its center. It was cracked down the middle, the figure adorning the top long since turned to rubble, but the basin itself was massive, lined with pale blue mosaic and dotted with red tiles. "I've never seen anything like this before."

Knuckles approached the basin, kneeling in the rubble as he leaned in to examine the design, his own excitement shining through an ecstatic grin. "I've seen something like this!" He turned towards Buck, his gaze far away. "I only saw little pieces in the temple back home. Never something so intact." Around the town square, he could see grooves that must have existed for shops to set up in, the shattered buildings that still held scorch marks, and the blooming trees that burst through the remains of the buildings, indifferent to the history they buried. And despite the love and honor he held for his people he couldn't imagine living alone on this Angel Island. The past lingered too closely.

His counterpart had been right when he'd called it a graveyard.

Standing, Knuckles dusted the dirt from his fur, nodding to the others. “Let’s keep moving then. We need to reach the top of the shrine.”

“If we want to reach the top of the shrine we have to go through the temple,” Knuckles told them, looking up at the towering pyramid. The steps, which hadn’t been visible upon entry to the city, had come into view at the end of the street that the square opened to. The destruction around the pyramid was unmatched; collapsed ceilings and whole chunks missing from the buildings surrounding the central temple, remnants of machines and armor littered the area, most of it rotten or rusted away by the centuries.

“I could fly us up there.” Tails offered, eyeing the structure. But BB was the one who shook his head, reaching his hand high above his head.

“He’s right,” Buck looked at Tails, “It’s far too tall, and it’d exhaust you before even getting to the second person.” He turned to the taller Knuckles, who was examining the empty hull of a machine engulfed covered in overgrown plant life. “Lead the way, tallest Knux!”

Ignoring his friend’s grumbles they followed Knuckles, who surprisingly began to lead them away from the central temple.

“Uh, Knuckles, you’re not turned around again are you?” Amy asked delicately, glancing behind her as if to make sure the temple was in the opposite direction.

“‘Course not! Team Knuckles never goes astray with me at the helm!” He tossed over his shoulder jovially, earlier solemnity nearly melting away. The ruins had always had an odd hold on him.

Lingering.

Expectant.

It had frightened him as a puggle, but now he felt more curious than anything.

Buck turned to Tails incredulously, “ *Team Knuckles?* ” He mouthed. Tails snickered and shook his head.

“Didn’t Scarfz tell you?” Amy asked Buck, eyes shining with repressed laughter. “He’s Knuckles’ sidekick.”

Nodding his approval, Knuckles didn’t bother hiding his smugness as

the resistance leader turned to toss his short-circuiting blue friend a shit-eating grin.

Buck's screech echoed through the street. " *WHAT?!"*

Knuckles led them confidently through the streets to a smaller building. The door no longer existed, but the walls were intact considering the surrounding area, the brambles less overgrown in this area. Knuckles paused for a moment, eyeing them curiously, before shrugging. Bringing up the rear, the other Knuckles examined the area with a scrutinizing gaze, clearly growing more suspicious the more he saw.

"Hey, lunkhead me," Voice low, Knuckles knelt to inspect a group of stones with scorch marks, nose sniffing intently. The scent of burned wood lingered low to the ground. "How many people did you say lived on this island?"

"Very funny, Knuckles." Amy huffed, fists set on her hips.

"No one lives on this island, it's considered cursed by outsiders. My father and I were the last to leave." Knuckles answered the other, stopping at the entrance to the small building. The resistance leader stood up, violet eyes hard as stone as they examined their surroundings with renewed focus.

"Well, we're not alone it seems."

Surrounded by such magnificence fallen into decay, the young girl couldn't help but feel her breath catch in her throat as she surveyed the history etched into stone. Her father stood behind her, tense and expectant. He'd told her stories her entire life, taught her everything he'd ever learned about her culture in the vain hopes of righting the wrongs of hundreds of years ago.

But now, in the face of the destruction his people had caused, he couldn't help but fear. Would she turn him away? Curse him and the

people he once called his own for the destruction they'd wrought? He couldn't know.

Adjusting the brim of his hat he began to call out to her, stopping as she turned, eyes bright and cheeks moist.

Tears… he realized with a thrumming sadness.

"Dear girl, I'm so sorry." But apologies were little more than droplets of water in the wake of it all. The girl shook her head, looking at her father with conflicting emotions, one shining through nonetheless; love.

"Thank you for bringing me here, father." She smiled, "I'm glad to be able to see this place with my own eyes." And truly, she should never thank him for anything, but the old turtle couldn't help but return her gesture, offering out an arm to her.

"Come then, sweet girl, let's visit the shrine and offer our prayers. It's our last stop before our trip home." Nodding excitedly, she quickly brushed the offending tears from her eyes and took her adoptive father's arm, asking all sorts of questions- somber and curious alike- as they picked their way through the ruins of the echidna city towards the central shrine.

Despite the alarming revelation, they had to press onward. Time was not on their side, today being the final day that Buck and BB could remain on Scarfz' planet without any of the vague repercussions another Tails had mentioned. Neither blue hedgehog was too keen on going back to their own world when Scarfz' situation remained so dire. But with the vague cloud of catastrophe hanging over their heads they knew they couldn't risk it.

The sun was at its zenith, beating down relentlessly, the cool valley air doing little to shield from the midday glare. The stones were blessedly cool, however, the ruins of the city still managing to circulate a breeze through its streets. Tails decided that when given the time, he'd return to examine the fantastic remains of a once powerful tribe.

The building was spacious, but not nearly as grand as others closest to the central shrine. Motes of dust rose into the air at the sudden

disturbance. Specks of dust were framed in a halo of golden light that trickled through the ruined roof, swirling lazily through air, creating entrancing designs that lasted for fleeting moments. Against the far wall, a door stood, solid and intact.

Knuckles seemed withdrawn again, plucking at a bandage on his arm idly. It dawned on the group that returning to his childhood home, the word being used loosely, might be taking a toll on the normally lighthearted echidna.

The door, made of a polished stone that gleamed dully even in the dark, gave way easily under Knuckles' hand. He frowned for a brief moment before shrugging away whatever doubts.

"Do…. do those steps lead down?" Amy asked hesitantly. Behind her, Tails was already rummaging through his pack for a light.

"Yup!" Knuckles was clearly trying to regain his upbeat mood. "Echidna's are powerful diggers, so lots of the city was underground!" They followed him in, the narrow beam of light illuminating the wide stairway.

"During the war, most of the destruction was above ground, I don't think they realized how much was below. The steps you saw at the foot of the shrine were the public entrance, or so Pops said. The priests and other echidna's went through the temple itself." He continued, taking a sharp left. They followed him a bit clumsily, Buck's Knuckles the only other one who seemed to have a sense of direction and purpose in the dark earth.

"This is amazing." He whispered, moving to catch up to his counterpart. "I never imagined the underground ruins might extend to the city." The thought of a ghost city nestled beneath the ruins was near-unbelievable. But the tunnels looked strong, lined by powerful, stout pillars that curved with the walls like a protective rib cage. "But if there was a whole underground city level how come your tribe… how come they were wiped out?"

Taller legs slowed to a stop and Knuckle's stared at the paved dark blue stone of the floor, eyes far away. "Pops said the battle demolished the city. But our tribe continued to battle. I don't know what the ancients did but they took *something* . Drove us away and both groups kept fighting around the world, neither able to forget." He took a deep, steadying breath. "Pops was the last of his group. He and my mom came here, to hide." A rueful smile spread over his face.

“It was… nice. For awhile.”

“When did…” Tails’ voice came forward now, reaching out to hold his friend’s arm. He never knew… they never asked. *No one* asked. Ugly things lay in the past, what was the point of dragging them forward?

But now, Knuckles was openly telling them. That meant something.

“I was five.” Knuckles breathed out, shaking the melancholy from his face. “It’s alright. They taught me well.”

He pointed to the end of the halfway, where all they could see was darkness. “We’re coming up to the temple’s library, after that it’s a straight shot up to the shrine.”

“Library?” Tails blinked, pulling back his hand to glare at his friend accusingly. “You didn’t mention a library!”

“Why would I? It’s not like we can read anything on the scrolls-”

“Knuckles, *we* can read!” Amy cried out, rubbing her temples. Buck exchanged a glance between his Knuckles and BB, confused.

“Wait, Knuckles can’t rea-”

“I’m saying its not in common Mobian! It’s the echidna language!”

“Knuckles.” Tails said the name like he was speaking to a toddler. “We can translate it. Remember UT?”

“He can read ancient echidna?” Knuckles looked gobsmacked. “I thought it was only universal.”

“Chaos help me.” The shorter echidna muttered as Tails looked about ready to scream.

“Gods above.” The fox breathed out, pulling out his communicator. “I’ll tell Sticks to load him up on an automated carrier to drop him off this way. I can go grab him and meet you in the library.”

“Nuh uh,” Buck shook his head. “No can do. There’s someone else on this island and I don’t think it’s a good idea to split up. We’ll all go get him.”

“I can take care of myself just fine.” Tails crossed his arms, miffed, but didn’t argue further. “Well, it’ll take about an hour for UT to get here anyway. Let’s check out the library and shrine. Maybe we’ll find the

answer to our problems just laid out."

That earned him a chuckle, but Amy stepped forward.

"There's no use in going into the library if we can't translate anything." She reasoned. "I say we go to the drop sight to gather him, it'll take us about thirty minutes to get back there."

"Not with yours truly!" Gesturing wildly at himself and BB Buck fought to keep the offended tone out of his voice.

"You *just* said we shouldn't split up." Knuckles reminded him dryly, his taller counterpart snickering beside him.

"Oh right."

"Let's just head out then, I have some lunch stashed on the plane." Tails decided, pointing his flashlight back the way they came. BB hopped up excitedly, landing easily on the fox's shoulders.

"Tails, you genius you." Buck beamed, clapping his shoulder. Tails laughed aloud at the praise, the happiness soothing the shadows in his eyes and dark bags beneath them for a brief moment.

The group pressed back into the cool darkness.

Lugging UT back to the library was going to be a nightmare. The little droid was unable to traverse the ocean on his own and had to be packed aboard a plane programmed to drop him off at the island. Tails fretted over the landing site, hoping his robot wouldn't be too damaged in the landing process.

Buck eyed the approaching plane dubiously, the quick explanation of the robot's purpose eluding him still. "So he's a translator?" He looked towards Tails, who was circling the landing area once more, glancing into the sky every now and again.

"He's a universal translator," the fox corrected, "meaning that he can translate anything to common. Runes, different languages, thoughts, even lies-"

"Wait I'm sorry, *thoughts?"* Buck craned to look at Tails, who only

seemed slightly peeved at his explanation. Amy coughed behind them, her expression none too happy at the prospect of seeing the droid again.

“There’s a reason he was shelved.” She mumbled into her glove. Buck chuckled, glancing at BB who seemed much more intrigued at the concept than the rest.

“Well at least talking to you will be a cinch now, little bud.” BB grinned in lieu of a response, more bared teeth than a smile. Buck had… mellowed a lot in recent years compared to how he’d been at BB’s age.

Overhead, the plane droned by lazily, gliding low through the air before deploying it’s hatch with a loud metallic clunk. The droid drifted down, buoyed by three mini-parachutes attached to it.

Tails did his best to soften his landing, hands outstretched to meet the droid the moment it was within reach. Amy stayed back, eyeing the machine even as Buck, BB and Knuckles approached it curiously.

“You want to see how it works?” Tails asked them brightly, his chest puffing with something like pride in his invention. Only BB nodded vigorously, but it was all the fox needed to flip a switch from somewhere behind the machine. He joined the three in watching it putter to life, the faint sound of fine machinery whirring buzzing through the air before its eyes lit up. It turned briefly, seeming almost a bit confused before settling on BB, who was watching intently.

“Fucking finally.” It translated, eyes glowing as it operated, “ **Signs can only get so much across.**”

Buck huffed in disapproval, two hands on his hips as he looked down on BB. “Hey now.”

UT’s eyes flickered brightly, as his delicate sensors picked up something to translate. “**You better not put our damn potty mouth on full-fucking blast here, bowling ball-looking bi-“**

“*Ok* , I think we’ve had enough of a demonstration.” Knuckles reached around to switch the robot off, giving both blue hedgehogs a flat stare. They both at least had the decency to look at least a little embarrassed. “Let’s just get this thing to the ruins.”

Seeing UT disabled, Amy’s tense posture eased almost instantly, joining the group merrily. The taller Knuckles met them at the gates,

waving brightly as the group approached.

Making their way through the winding streets felt… odd, the second time around. Buck found himself glancing around more often, the thin quills on the back of his neck prickling with uncertainty the further they made their way through. Nothing could be hiding in the shadows, the daylight shining brightly, leaving little to the imagination. Beside him, BB must have sensed something as his normally easy going expression had settled into something more alert, dark eyes darting around.

Knuckles' earlier assessment of not being alone on the island had not left any of their minds and the two hedgehogs wondered what exactly they might encounter.

But the streets remained blessedly silent, yielding no secrets as the group made their way through the winding streets once more.

Within the temple, the library was nothing like they'd expected.

Aside from the heavy layers of dust that coated every surface, it looked like a room trapped in time.

With Tails' help, Knuckles uncovered the skylight mechanisms, where warped glass amplified the sunbeams from above, instantly illuminating the room.

And despite the countless years of dust and decay, the room was nothing short of *astounding*. The main entrance bloomed outwards, two grand staircases leading down onto the central floor. Deep blue marble lined the floors, accenting the pale yellow that seemed to be the common building block of the city. A deeper, more precious stone, lined the arches, the semi transparent nature of the rock giving the ceiling a near ethereal glow. The tapestries that must have hung against one way were on the floor, crumpled and rotted, but Tails could make out magnificent colors of blue, a molten yellow and burning red.

It must have been a library for scholars, as the central floor was filled with heavy, wooden tables, tomes left open and scrolls unravelled. Untouched for over two centuries. Huge stacks of scrolls and books

lined the central floor, neat signs etched in stone over the arches.

“Knuckles…” Amy was in awe, like the rest of them, but had found her tongue first. “This is…”

“I know.” He breathed again, stroking the marble banister idly. “It really is something.”

As much as some members of the group wanted to stop and examine the library further (Tails and Buck’s Knuckles practically vibrating with anticipation) Buck and the taller Knux insisted they press on.

He seemed uneasy surrounded by so much knowledge that remained firmly out of his reach and Tails suspected that might have had a hand in Knuckles’ avoidance of more erudite tendencies.

Ultimately, Tails decided to stay with Amy and UT to begin scanning some scrolls and tapestries, Knuckles reluctantly breaking off to join the two blue hedgehogs and his taller counterpart.

“You’re going to need my help examining the Master Emerald anyway.”

If there is one. Buck didn’t voice his doubts aloud, however. But the absence of a Master Emerald would… complicate an already difficult situation.

The grand hall tapered off into a smaller alcove, twin wooden doors nestled beneath the shadows of an overhang. Buck pushed the doors open with ease, stopped by a large hand on his shoulder. The hero turned to see the taller echidna’s face twisted in thought and concern.

“Knux? Everything okay?” But at a firm squeeze from the echidna Buck immediately quieted, alert.

“I noticed it earlier…” He began softly, uncertainly. “But the doors opened with little trouble. But it made sense. Last time I used them was ten years ago. But these….” He gestured to the doors that had just swung forward. “These haven’t been opened in over two hundred years.”

Buck felt a chill run down his spine, looking past the dark doorway. It seemed they had stumbled upon their company.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 3 got too long so I split it in half yet again. Thanks for being patient.

Thanks again to TharkFlark1 for beta-ing so much amongst a hectic schedule, I truly appreciate your work and attention. Ren and fourth-chaos-baby? Y'all keep me going thanks so much.

Hidden Speaker

Chapter Summary

> The group presses on, finding more questions among ancient answers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Back in another space and time, the midday sun was tempered by the cool air rolling off of the forest. As Wachowski led Scarfz out to the backyard he was proud to note that the older hedgehog hardly needed his help to stand now. Shadow followed them out, Tom and Maddie close behind him.

“Well,” Maddie sighed, rubbing the front of her jeans in what seemed like a nervous gesture. “I suppose it’s time you three head back.” Beside her, Tom nodded, reaching forward to ruffle the top of Wachowski’s head once more, minding the sharp quills.

“Be careful, bud.” He said seriously, the words evened out by the careful smile. “Tails will be home tomorrow from camp, but if you need us then all you have to do is ask.” He turned to Shadow, giving the black hedgehog a friendly nod and smile. “Take care of them.”

Of him, the human’s eyes seemed to say

Shadow nodded back firmly at the unspoken request. The risk of danger to Wachowski’s person was low but… seeing an alternate version of himself going through such an intense physical struggle was not something that would leave the boy unmarked. Inwardly, Shadow hoped that they had made it through the worst of it.

Gripping the warm gem tightly, he called out the command, space twisting around him before they disappeared altogether in a muted flash of light.

“OH MY GODS.” The screech that greeted them as they materialized

in the lab was enough to make even Shadow flinch, the dark hedgehog shooting the source a positively murderous glare.

“Sticks! Please tell me there isn’t another rock golem you’re trying to sing to sleep?” Scarfz ears flattened against his head, but at Sticks’ watery stare he smiled back reassuringly.

“Sonic!”

“Whoa, hey careful there.” He winced, patting the badger tenderly on the back before detaching himself from the embrace. “Tender spots.” Sticks drew back quickly, an apology shining in her eyes before offering him a watery grin. Nodding eagerly, she wiped at her eyes with a loud sniff.

“Tails and the rest are out trying to figure out what’s going on. I’m supposed to give him a call if you arrived.” She explained, pulling out a communicator with a distasteful frown.

“Don’t let me stop you, Wachowski and I are gonna get lunch ready. You want anything?”

“Uh, sure. I’ll take whatever you make.” She waved a hand, putting in commands hesitantly to the handheld device. Scarfz perked up at this, nearly rubbing his hands together in devilish glee. Sticks would eat *anything* and he loved trying to throw her off with the most insane (but edible of course) combinations.

“Coming right up!” He reached out as he headed to the kitchen, Wachowski’s hand already slipping into his, the buzzing tiredness chased away by the crackle of energy like a shot of caffeine.

The kid tugged excitedly as he began to rattle off his plans for breakfast, going on about the wonders of breakfast burritos (breakfast in a *blanket,* Scarfz!) The energy Wachowski was sending him made him feel like he was walking on staticky clouds, sharpening the world around him with a muted fuzzy edge.

At an offhanded pun, he laughed a bit harder than normal, euphoric.

Sticks’ ears perked up as she realized the two had already left, followed by a quiet Shadow.

“Oh, maybe I should have let them know about the *other* Shadow too.” She muttered. Shrugging after a moment, she opened a channel with Tails to fill him in on the situation. Surely, they’d get along. Shadow

had seemed pretty out of it too, the hedgehog dozing off not long after they'd pulled the DNA sample.

"Ah well, it'll be fine!" She decided merrily.

In the kitchen, Scarfz rummaged through the fridge, searching for the pack of frozen burgers he kept handy in case the rare urge to whip something up struck him. Grabbing the package he tore through the plastic easily, laughing brightly at the sight. How easily the film broke apart!

"Burgers funny now?" Wachowski gave him a wry smile, perched on the counter. "Maybe you're loopier than I thought." The underlying concern was evident, but Scarfz only laughed again, shaking his head.

"I'm just glad I can, y'know, move around again." He reached out to briefly clasp Wachowski's shoulder, facing the younger hedgehog fully. "Thank you." He added, more serious. "I know this hasn't been easy for you and… thanks." He trailed off lamely, feeling a bit sheepish. "For everything."

Beaming brighter than the sun, Wachowski threw his arms around Scarfz' neck, as gently as he could manage from his place on the countertop.

Hesitating for only a brief moment, Scarf returned the embrace, squeezing firmly before pulling back.

"Now what do you say to a couple of burgers?"

"Yeah!" The smaller hog says with an enthusiastic grin.

Laughing once more, smile wide, Scarfz set about preparing the materials. He chatted easily with Wachowski, the younger hedgehog making quick work of gathering the ingredients needed.

Leaning against the counter, Scarfz blinked away some of the sharpness in his eyes. The lights in the kitchen seemed too dim and at the same time too strong. It reminded him of walking into a darker room after being outside in the bright sunlights, dark spots and lights dancing in front of his eyes as they struggled to adjust. His mind felt a

bit tender...

Can a brain feel sunburned?

But the thought was so ridiculous Scarfz only snorted to himself. The knife in his hand slipped briefly, avoiding his thumb by a slim margin. Gripping it tighter, he pushed it back down against the tomatoes, hyper focused on the task, knife cutting through the tomato with ease.

“Scarfz?” Clattering loudly against the countertop, the knife splattered red tomato juice across the surface. Composing himself quickly, Scarfz turned to look at Wachowski, who regarded him with muted alarm. “Are you okay?”

“Sure am!” He scoffed, concentrating to pick up the knife as casually as he could, wiping the blade against a clean rag nearby. “Why do you ask?”

“You were staring at that piece of tomato for like… a solid three minutes straight.” Wachowski tried to laugh, his expression giving away his nervousness.

Three minutes really were an eternity to any Sonic doing a single task. But… that wasn’t right, was it?

“It did *not* take me three minutes to cut that tomato, kiddo.” Scarfz waved the nonsense away with a slightly offended tone. “I might not be at my best, but there’s no way I’m *that* slow. Anyway, tomato is sliced!” Turning away, he got started on placing the patties on the grill prepped on the stove, missing Wachowski’s wide, concerned eyes.

The young hedgehog looked at the counter top where the tomato sat, uncut.

Shadow walked through the hut, searching out a quiet room he could wait in while Buck and the rest made their way back. Scarfz and Wachowski seemed to have the food situation fully in hand. Meanwhile, Shadow only wanted to find a quiet place to sit in, feeling a bit overwhelmed at all the interaction he’d had to bear in the past day and a half.

The living room seemed perfect, wooden shades drawn, leaving the room cool and dim. Breathing out a sigh of relief, Shadow made his way to a couch, ready to settle down and-

Something shifted in the corner, all too familiar crimson eyes meeting his own. A low groan built in his chest as he realized what was happening.

“Well this is just dandy.” Of course his counterpart would also gravitate to the only other quiet room in the shack. However he couldn’t help the brief surge of triumph as the others' red eyes seemed to light up with confusion, before landing on suspicion.

“More tricks, it seems.” The other muttered, sitting stiffly on the couch he’d no doubt been snoozing on before Shadow had entered.

“I’m not a fan of tricks.” Shadow shrugged, forcing his fur to lie flat as he took the other couch, laying back fully. “I did, however, come here for some peace and quiet.”

For a moment, it seemed like the other Shadow might argue, already revving up and taking offense at the nonchalant tone. Suppressing a smirk, Shadow allowed his eyes to slide shut, utterly ignoring the tightly wound, not-so-Ultimate Lifeform.

“That seems… agreeable.” The reply was grit out, but Shadow took it as a win nonetheless.

BB carried Tails’ flashlight firmly, following half a step behind the two Knuckles as they followed the winding stone staircases.

The cool stone steps were smoothed out, the last remnants of a long legacy of ritual and history. Buck and BB brought up the rear, occasionally zipping back down from where they had come to take a closer look at the landings.

The stair cases seemed to be a waypoint for multiple areas, evening out into banistered landings that led to pitch dark hallways. The bandaged echidna ignored them all, firmly pressing on upward.

“Chaos, I didn’t realize how tall this shrine was.” Buck groaned,

stopping for a moment to stretch his calves.

“There were easier ways to get up to the shrine. Elevators, I think.” The taller Knuckles murmured from the front, his own breathing a little labored.

“Why aren’t we taking *those?!”*

“ Do you really want to take a four hundred year old elevator?” The resistance leader asked with a wry smile.

“Closer to five hundred years, actually. They went inactive during the first attack. Power cut off.”

“Five hundred.” Knuckle’s amended at his counterpart’s correction.

BB hopped past a slumped Buck, giving him a smug look as he passed him.

“Judases.” Buck groaned, sluggishly moving forward again. “The lot of you.”

Finally, the steps evened out onto the final landing. The air was warmer up here. Fresher. Knuckles pushed hard on the doors, the stone grinding as it was moved.

As the doors swung outward sunlight pierced through the cracks, blinding the group momentarily. Stepping out into the shrine they blinked, eyes adjusting to the afternoon sun.

“Where’s the Emerald then?” The shorter echidna huffed. They’d emerged from a smaller pathway on the side of the pyramid, the shrine stretching up another level above them.

“Don’t know about no emerald, but I’ll take you to the central altar.”

“Great.” Buck muttered, eyeing the steps darkly. “More stairs.”

The flights were brief. The top of the shrine was as damaged as the city, only a handful of pillars holding up stone work around the edge. A few of the delicate arches remained, framing the open area with simple, yet beautiful curving forms.

They walked up the final steps, where the main altar was placed, stopping short as two kneeling figures turned to look at them.

The older one was a turtle. The elderly figure gasped, struggling to his

feet at the sight of the hedgehogs and two echidnas.

“Father!” The girl gasped, reaching out to steady him. Knuckles gaped and even though he was an unmeasurable distance from his own land, he’d recognize the voice anywhere. The pale orange fur, kind eyes widened in concern, a spectre from the past that looked just as she had when she’d been taken by Chaos...

It was impossible.

“*Tikal?!*”

The orange echidna watched them guardedly. The turtle she’d just called ‘father’ seemed distraught, trying to push her behind him. She stood fast however, placing him behind a protective arm.

“Who are you?! And how do you know my name.”

“Whoa whoa, I have no idea who you are.” The taller Knuckles held up a hand, scratching his head with the other. “I also… have never seen another echidna before.”

“That’s because she’s not supposed to be alive.” The resistance leader ground out, still trying to wrap his head around seeing the former guardian *here*.

In an instant, the turtle stepped forward. Face contorted in fear and fury he leveled an accusing finger at them.

“No! No, you’re not going to hunt her too! You already got the others… what was left of them… wasn’t that enough? *Please* leave us alone.”

“Whoa!” Buck stepped forward, remaining calm as the pair snapped their attention to him. “We’re friendly! We’re just here to help our friend.”

The turtle seemed to melt in relief, recognition sparking in his wrinkled features.

“Sonic! I hardly recognized you. Forgive… forgive my outburst. My eyes aren’t what they used to be.” He peered longer at the group,

alternating between BB, Buck, and the two Knuckles. “No… definitely not what they used to be.”

“Oh, you’re that old turtle! Tuttle, was it?” Knuckles perked up, the proverbial light bulb lighting over his head,

“Tucker.” The turtle corrected him gently. “I must say however, we weren’t quite expecting company on this island.”

“I’ll say.” Buck’s Knuckles crossed his arms, the suspicion lingering.

“What are you two doing here? I didn’t know turtles could have, uh, spiky children.” Buck and BB shot him a flat stare, the smaller smacking his forehead in frustration.

“Adoption is a pretty good way to expand the selection.” Tucker chuckled. Tapping at his daughter’s still outstretched arm he shuffled forward. “Now if I may ask, what are *you* doing here? As far as I knew, this city has been abandoned for hundreds of years.”

Buck tried to peer past the two figures, heart dropping when all he saw was empty space.“We’re here to find something that can help our friend.”

As Buck and his Knuckles explained their situation to the older turtle, the taller Knuckles shuffled forward, inching past Tucker to get a closer look at the central altar.

As a kid, he’d never been allowed on this level of the shrine. His father always stayed with him on the lower levels while his mother had ascended the final steps to offer her prayers. His parents had always scaled the exterior, preferring the view and climb over opening ancient stairwells. He could remember the feel of the sun on his face as he clung to his father’s broad shoulders, feeling safe and warm, the sound of his mother's claws gripping the stone with impressive strength.

The altar was… almost a let down. The stones must have been beautiful once, but exposed to the elements and destruction much of the images and lettering that had swirled around it were illegible. It was closer to a platform than an altar. A large hole dominating the center.

The space seemed incomplete. Knuckles couldn’t help but lean closer, needing to see if anything remained, the compulsion deeper and more entrancing than that of a mere passing interest. As a kid, this

compulsion had followed him, too foreign and large to be anything but terrifying to a small puggle surrounded by ruin and decay.

And now it was back again. An expectancy that washed over him weakly in waves, drawing out his curiosity. But it was more than that now. He *needed* to know more.

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

Knuckles yelped, only to find the echidna girl (Tikal, was it?) next to him, eyeing him amusedly.

“Uh, it sure is in front of us.” He tried lamely. Truthfully, the ruins of the city were far more stunning than this. Covered in grime, mud, rubble and some plants trying weakly to take root it was a less than grand ruin. More stone and dirt than anything else.

“Father said something precious lay here and people would come from far and wide to offer prayers. But only a precious few could approach this altar to pray.” A faint shimmer caught her eye, coming from her side. Tikal reached out for it. Her fingers broke through the grime easily, feeling something hard come loose, it’s jagged shape leaving an imprint in the dirt where it had been half buried.

A shard of a precious gem.

Smothering her glee, Tikal wiped the dirt and grime from the piece, careful not to cut her fingers on the sharp edges. “He said it was shattered by the last fighters. A member of a race of healers.” With a gentle movement, she held it out for the other echidna to examine.

Knuckles took it from her slowly. “They were called star speakers here," she continued, "but had many names for themselves. Father said they were the closest beings to Chaos.”

But Knuckles hardly heard her words, the shimmering green gem in his hand sparkling in a familiar way.

This was it. This was the pull. The expectant presence that had tugged at a part of him deeper than instinct the moment his parents died, that he had run far away from and tried to forget.

Setting it down gingerly by the altar, Knuckles got to work. It was an itch. A sense. An urge to make it *complete* . The echidna was unaware

of the odd looks as he moved around the altar space. It was all *here* , he could feel it; carefully raising a rock here, reaching into a crevice there, each time bringing a dirtied green shard to the altar.

Despite being ignored, Tikal and the others were able to piece what he was doing fairly quickly, the echidna girl rushing to polish the dirtied shards.

It didn't take him long to sniff them out, slipping into an easy flow as he moved around the shrine.

Once he was done, Knuckles stepped back, contemplating the careful rows of green shards, each of a varying size, before he moved again.

Red blood pooled at the tips of his fingers as he clumsily fused the gems together, tapping into an instinct that had lain dormant his entire life. The only interruption he acknowledged was the other Knuckles knocking something soft into his hands.

Gloves.

“Use mine.” The shorter echidna said gruffly, holding the gloves with one black tipped finger. “It’ll make the work easier.”

Nodding his gratitude, Knuckles slipped them on before diving back into his work. Despite his clumsiness at the task, the Master Emerald stood complete.

Releasing the tension he’d been carrying since he’d begun, Knuckles stepped back, admiring his handiwork. But nothing happened.

The emerald was still dead. The earlier gleam he’d seen was lost amidst the dull facets, not even the sun managing to make the gem look anything other than a dirty, grayed green.

“It’s too drained.” The resistance leader realized. This emerald may not have been his own, but he could spot a drained gem when he saw one. “It’s dead.”

But Tikal stepped forward, placing a reverent hand over the smooth surface. “No…. there’s *something* there. Alive.”

“Okay, so it needs a jumpstart.” The resistance leader reasoned, looking towards his taller counterpart who had been quiet ever since beginning his task. “Where are the chaos emeralds?” Surprisingly, it was the turtle who answered, eyes sharp, a hand tightening on the

pouch at his side.

“The chaos crystals are the only gems I know of, but their strength is limited. Surely you don’t-”

But BB was already shaking his head.

“It has to be chaos emeralds. They’re near infinite.” Buck explained idly, trying to form a plan with this new information. He scratched at his chin. Between him and BB they could probably gather enough emeralds… The hero turned to his Knuckles. “Would outside help work, maybe?”

“Like other emeralds?” The resistance leader seemed doubtful for a moment, before his expression grew interested, the beginnings of a grin taking root. “Yeah… that just might work.”

Wachowski had gone to offer both Shadows a burger, denied twice by them (though Buck’s Shadow had thanked him for the offer while the other one had simply ignored him). Scarfz and Wachowski sat around the simple table, joined by Sticks who gleefully filled them in on the situation at Angel Island while they ate.

“They found that big ol’ shiny rock Buck mentioned earlier.” She said, promptly taking a huge bite of the burger before continuing. “They seemed pretty happy about it, met some old coot and his daughter too.”

“I can’t believe there’s echidna ruins.” Wachowski murmured, gaze far away. He soon tuned back in, however as she began to fill them in on the others’ plan.

“Tails said they were massive, looking like a huge battle had happened there.” Neither mobian noticed Wachowski’s flinch at this. “All things considered, things are going pretty smoothly for them too.”

Scarfz coughed into his glove, wincing apologetically at Stick’s slightly annoyed glare. The cough turned into a hack, racking through his entire body. Steadying himself against the edge of the table Scarfz struggled to breathe through the coughing, tears welling in his eyes from the pressure. It was like trying to inhale slime, the air wheezing

through his teeth, offering no relief.

“Are you okay?” The kid meant well, but Scarfz couldn’t help but chafe at that question.

“I’m fine.” He swallowed, feeling the worst of the fit finally pass. “Sorry, I think I swallowed wrong.”

Mmm… not.. true.

The words floated through his mind, unbidden. But Scarfz could hardly find time to dwell on the strange voice as he felt another coughing fit come on.

“I’m gonna go take a plate to Shadow anyway.” He lied, getting up from the table hurriedly. “I’ll be right back.” The short burst of speed he used to move further away once he was out of sight was far more draining than normal, but worth it.

A hand clasped firmly over his mouth, Scarfz coughed. He felt like he was hacking up a lung, unable to rid his throat of the terrible itch that had taken residence, feeling like he might very well suffocate from the pressure. The glove felt moist against his hand.

Finally settling, he gasped for breath, coughing lightly at the sudden onslaught of air against his abused trachea. Spittle clung to his lips and he wiped at it, a bit disgusted. But something caught his eye…

Is that…

On his glove, in the palm where he’d been coughing, was a bright red splatter of blood. The stain covered the entirety of his palm and the hero tried to quell his quickening breath as fear began to creep up his spine, clawing deep, deep into his chest.

“Scarfz?”

Clenching his fist, Scarfz turned around to see Wachowski peeking past the door frame, tension melting from his small frame as he saw him.

Shit.

“Hey kiddo, just… needed some quiet time. You know.” It was a terrible lie and some part of him saw the kid knew it too. But Wachowski only nodded, a valiant smile making an appearance.

“I understand.”

“I’ll be out in a bit.” Nodding once more, Wachowski’s soft step led him away from the room, leaving Scarfz alone once more.

He tore the gloves off, dumping them in the trash can.

Scarfz felt *heavy*.

He had to stay calm. Wachowski had stepped into the other room, following Sticks for something or other. He couldn’t remember. He couldn’t stop thinking about how heavy his body felt.

Maybe I should lie down…

A wave of nausea washed over him and he swallowed hard, tongue feeling swollen and fuzzy in his mouth. Scarf retched, his gag reflex kicking in.

Another cough bubbled up and the hedgehog felt fear well up along with it. Each breath grew louder, air hardly able to make it through the violent hits.

He became suddenly aware of the cool tile pressed against his cheek.

When did I lay down? The thought was drowned out by more coughing fingers curling weakly to grip onto something, *anything*.

Scarfz wasn’t sure how long he lay there, brain sluggishly trying to catch up, mouth gaping and gasping like a fish out of water.

When he was little, long before he’d met Tails, he’d fallen into a frozen lake. Ice and darkness had engulfed him, water smothering his screams and filling his lungs, and he could remember slamming a tiny fist against the ice. The cold terror freezing his limbs faster than the water could hope to manage. A tall lynx had dragged him out then, the fear and darkness lingering long after he was out of the ice.

He knew there’d be no one to pull him out this time.

Wet pooled at his lips. His body flailing and acting on sheer instinct alone, eyes falling shut as the hacking tore through his body. Gods

above, he was *drowning,* gloved fists thudding weakly against the tile .

Every gasp was empty, bringing no relief to the burning in his chest, the fear giving way to a fuzzied darkness, eyes turning glassy and unfocused. Heart in his throat, he wished he could push that out too.

Steps sounded, followed by a bright voice that cut through the pounding in his ears. Wachowski. His heart plummeted through the floor, a new kind of dread gripping his thoughts.

Get up get up *, don't let him see!*

He bit down, rolling to one side.Kneeling, his arms could barely support the force of his coughs. Scarfz bowed his head, touching the tile floor.

The voices had stopped. Half mad with fear, he tried to stop coughing, shoving his fist in his mouth. The retching turned to a heave, his lunch pushing up, *up* . Past his throat and lips. And he couldn't cough, couldn't breathe, could only close his eyes.

Paltry, undigested, the lunch he'd managed to eat not even an hour ago splattered onto the tile. Scarfz bit back a sob, unable to hold it back for long before he began coughing again.

What's happening!? His mind felt wired, electrified. A scream pierced his ears but it was all he could do to stay still.

A blue shape was in front of him - no, the sound of desperate crying and breathing mixing in with his own gasps and wheezes, growing weaker by the second.

Blindly reaching out, Scarfz tried to pat the head he knew to be Wachowski reassuringly.

"It's ok," he tried to tell him, but all that came out was a garbled choke.

More voices overlapped his now, each clamoring something wordless.

Curling away from the voices- *too loud, too close*- Scarf shut his eyes. Every ounce of strength given to staying together, feeling like he might come apart at the slightest touch, burst into nothingness.

Around the edges, a deep chord rumbled in his chest, all but drowned out by the terror that had seized his mind and body.

Not yet.

Back inside the cool, cavernous library, Amy and Tails were making progress. Amy approached the table Tails had claimed as their workspace, carefully placing scrolls before UT's sensors, stopping every so often to read the logs the droid printed out.

Sticks had called not long after the Knuckles and Sonics had left to let them know Scarfz, Wachowski and the other Shadow had arrived. And Scarfz was awake! And *walking!*

Humming happily the fox could practically feel his exhaustion melt away. They'd figure out whatever mumbo jumbo this was, fix Sonic up for good, and be able to put these past couple of weeks behind them entirely. The mere thought filled him with another buzz of energy.

"Find anything yet?" Amy asked brightly. The scrolls clattered briefly, wooden ends knocking against each other as she set them on the table.

"Not yet. Some of these are history texts, some holy books, and what I think are some pretty interesting works on fiction. An odd story" He laughed, holding up a particularly bright blue book. "But nothing on an emerald just yet."

"Oh? What kind of story?" Amy began slowly unfurling the new scroll in front of UT.

"Well I imagine it's fiction of a spiritual kind." He said, thumbing through the old pages with care. "It recounts detailed meetings of Chaos and beings close to the god, who serve as a waypoint of sorts. The translation UT gave me is only an approximation, but they called the race star speakers."

"Oh that's a lovely name." Amy hummed, "But I gotta admit, I was hoping for something juicier."

"It could be useful!" The fox protested, setting it carefully on the table. He pulled out the updated log, skimming through the latest translations. "The other Knuckles *did* say his tribe was attacked by Chaos."

“But Knuckles said that didn’t happen here.” Amy frowned.

“But he wasn’t *there,* Ames. Maybe his dad remembered wrong.”

A flash of light distracted him. His communicator.

“Must be Sticks again,” he sighed, an exasperated smile making its way to his face. Tails opened the channel, already rolling his eyes in preparation for the badger’s complaints over the tech. “Sticks what’s up, Sonic giving you a hard time?”

Shadow knew how precious memories could be. Having lost much of them after being reawakened on the ARK, he treasured the ones he did have. Even the painful ones.

Tending to Maria had been one of his duties, the black hedgehog becoming incredibly well versed in human anatomy and medicine. Sometimes, Maria’s attacks were frightening. He’d been so young when he’d seen the first one. Her hair clinging damply to her mouth as her body seized.

He hadn’t understood.

"NO!" Wachowski lunged forward, caught only by Shadow's experienced hands. He moved in front of the kid, kneeling down so they were face to face, but there was no recognition in the boys eyes.

Twisting wildly, he all but clawed at Shadow to get past him, desperate eyes set on the figure on the ground.

"LET ME GO. LET ME GO!"

Shadow could see the same terror and confusion in Wachowski. The other Shadow lingered behind him, drawn by the screams as well. Whatever he thought of it, Shadow didn’t know and didn’t care.

“Take the kid.” He ordered, pushing Wachowski back towards Sticks and his counterpart. When none of them made a move a snarl ripped from his throat. “*Now.”*

Surprisingly, his counterpart stepped forward first, grabbing the kid by the shoulder, wincing as a crackle of blue electricity ran up his arm

at the contact.

Once the kid was out of sight, Shadow moved quickly, gathering the limp blue body in his arms and moving towards the lab. “Get Eggman here.” He told the badger, who fluttered around, her hands straying close to her friend but never quite touching. “Tell him it’s an emergency. We need his help.”

Never in his life did Shadow think he might willingly ask Dr. Eggman for help. But strange situations called for stranger bedfellows.

In the time it took him to settle Scarfz and clean him up Sticks returned, face ashen.

“He’s on his way,” she rasped, her face devoid of its usual animation. “I called the others.”

“Good.”

“Buck and BB have a plan. Said they were going to gather their worlds’ emeralds?”

Shadow perked up at that.

“I see…” he trailed off in thought. If they’d found the emerald, then they planned on injecting the planet. They’d need the right tools. “Sticks.”

The badger’s eyes snapped to him. She was drifting, he could tell. Seeing her friend so ill was hard and Shadow understood. “You’ve done very well.” He said, “Get me the communicator, and then I want you to bring the kid and keep him company, alright?”

Reassured by the firm set of her mouth Shadow turned his attention back to the blue hedgehog.

Scarfz’ body was running on an empty tank. As much as he was loath to bring the kid back in, they needed his reserves.

Several things were set into motion.

Shadow had burst into action, allowing the kid to settle beside the

now still Scarfz. Wachowski's muzzle was streaked with tears, but he refused to acknowledge them or cry any more the moment he stepped back into the room.

Shadow didn't know whether to admire his bravery or let his heart ache, because *he* had been the one to ask the kid back in, despite the promise he'd made to Tom earlier that same day. He had asked Wachowski if he could do it and *seen* the truth in his eyes, but accepted the lie nonetheless.

But Shadow would have to dwell on his guilt when there wasn't a Sonic to keep alive and yet another, smaller one to care for.

Using BB's emerald, Buck and the smaller hedgehog had broken away from their group on Angel Island to gather up chaos emeralds from their respective worlds. Their plan to use chaos emeralds to jumpstart the Master and the world's energy would have ideally had more time to prepare, but there was hardly time to carry it out in its current unpolished state even now.

If Scarfz had been dying earlier, he was at death's doorstep now. The hedgehog was no longer conscious, sedated by the doctor who had arrived in a record ten minutes after the call, carrying all the materials needed for Scarfz.

After stabilizing him to the best of his ability, Eggman had called for a large carrier he'd been saving for some doomsday device, quickly cutting off his explanation and retrofitting it to reach the atmosphere at Shadow's thinly veiled impatience.

Throughout the entire frenzy of activity, his counterpart had remained silent, lingering in the room with Wachowski, sticking to the corners of the but never leaving the two hedgehog's. Shadow could only assume he was taking this seriously, now that the gravity of the situation had truly become apparent.

A brief sense of pressure in the void around him had Shadow perking up, ears flicking towards the minute disturbances in the emptiness. Turning his attention to a specific spot in the room, he waited. His counterpart looked at him oddly, frowning.

Not a second later, a flash of light burst into existence, followed by the forms of BB and Buck.

The two hedgehogs looked uncharacteristically grim, but seemed to come back to themselves as they spotted the two other blue

hedgehogs at the center of the room. Shadow watched as Buck and BB exchanged a wordless look (always in sync, those two) and BB bounded over towards Wachowski and Scarfz while Buck approached Shadow.

“How is he?”

“Stabilized. Barely.” The black hedgehog had never been once to dress up the truth. “I tried to get Wachowski’s mother but… there was no time. And he was in no state to help me find her.”

Buck only nodded, understanding and sympathy flashing briefly in his eyes before he turned towards the opening of the lab, where the carrier was being assessed by the Eggbots.

“We managed to gather seven. Four from our world and three from BB’s.” Shadow raised a brow at that, impressed despite himself. They had known the location of only two emeralds back on their world, one of them in G.U.N.’s possession. Which meant that the hero had managed to find two emeralds and persuade the organization to give up theirs in the span of a couple of hours. Unless-

Shadow’s eyes widened. “Did you steal the emerald from G.U.N.?”

“They weren’t being helpful.” Buck grumbled. “I’ll give it back!” He added at the agent’s incredulous stare. But Shadow only snorted.

“Truthfully, I could care less if you did or didn’t.”

“Some agent you are.”

Shadow shrugged, his expression darkening as he saw Eggman approach from the lab’s entrance.

“I won’t wait around until you’re ready to go.” The doctor said gruffly, clearly as uncomfortable with the strange dynamic as they were.

“Tails IS nearly back from Angel Island anyway.” Buck nodded. “We’ll need to redirect the energy of the emeralds, it’d be best that whoever goes is familiar with it.” Automatically, green and red eyes moved to Wachowski, who was sitting in a chair, body slumped onto Scarfz’ bed, both hands holding one of Scarfz’.

“I’ll go.” Shadow blurted, They’d asked too much (far too much) of the boy now. “I’ve done it before as well.”

Buck nodded, relieved. “We’ll both go, then.”

Loading up the machine took hardly five minutes before the engines roared to life, scattering dust and dirt into the air. It climbed higher and higher into the sky, until it disappeared entirely from view.

The machine was high in the air now, little speck melting into the unending blue. The machine had been slapped together, a modified ray that was lugged onto a heavy carrier but it would have to do. They were running out of time.

Wachowski swallowed his fear heavily. It was easier to pretend when the others were around.

Tails had arrived soon after Buck’s departure, barely a greeting between them before he’d gotten to work on his own monitor. Neither Knuckles or Amy were anywhere to be found, the fox briefly stating that they’d stayed behind to not slow the plane down.

Wachowski turned his attention back to the hedgehog in the bed. Scarfz had an uneasy grip on consciousness, but he was still breathing.

“Tails?” he asked quietly, voice nearly drowned out by the furious clacking sound of the fox’s typing?

“Mm?” The fox didn’t even look up. Exhaustion lined his every feature and he had such an angry, sorrowful look that the young hedgehog could have never imagined on his own brother.

“He’s going to be okay, right?” Wachowski was not usually one to seek encouragement, but the images of Scarfz’ shaking body flashed in his mind every time he closed his eyes.

“Of course he is. They’re going to shoot their beam, put chaos energy back into the world and everything will be fine.” His tone teetered on the edge of vehement and angry, and Wachowski couldn’t help but flinch at the stony edge to his words..

Things were getting worse.

Scarfz had been fine that morning but now he was worse now and no one knew why. He was laying on a bare mattress, all pretense of

resting stripped away. Sensors monitored his heart rate and organs, the numbers dipping faster than they should.

Wachowski laid down next to the dying hedgehog, pressing his hand into the dull blue fur of his arm, sending forward the chaos energy, a mantra of *please, please, please let him be okay* playing over and over in his mind, a desperate prayer to the empty world..

Scarfz squeezed his hand weakly, managing to crack one eye open. His eyes were glassy and unfocused. Wachowski swallowed hard, trying to not let the fear at the sight choke him.

“Don’t worry about me, Wachowski. It’s going to be okay.” Scarf rasped. But he wasn’t ready to lie to the kid again. Not now.

Things *would* be alright. He… might not be. Scarfz could feel it, the little remnants of energy crackling bravely in his chest, hardly affected now no matter how constantly Wachowski poured energy in.

“It’s starting.” Tails stated. And even though they couldn’t see from so far away they still looked to the sky, and hoped.

Hundreds of miles above the surface, Eggman’s modified machine pointed towards the planet below, barrel blooming open in a grotesque reminder of the Eclipse Cannon.

Buck watched from a small window, face set into a grim frown as he looked on the planet below, memories of a similar situation only two years ago trickling in unbidden. Measured steps sounded behind him and the hero flicked an ear in place of a greeting, knowing the other wouldn’t take offense. Shadow stopped beside him, taking in the view of the planet, vast and foreign from this distance.

Space was never something that ever lost the magnitude of presence. Even when he’d lived among the stars it had always felt suffocating, the unending darkness swallowing everything. Threatening to make even the Ultimate Lifeform go mad. He and Sonic knew firsthand the soul crushing nothingness of the void, and despite hating being so high up again in the air Shadow had stated his intention to

accompany Buck and Eggman the moment he was able to. It was the smallest of mercies to keep Wachowski and BB from venturing out into it just yet.

When Shadow finally spoke it was low, muted.

“Do you think this will work?” Buck stiffened at the words, tension coiling around his limbs. Over the years, he and Shadow had grown closer and it had come as a pleasant surprise when he realized that the dark hedgehog would confide in him from time to time. It was something he truly treasured and treated with the utmost respect.

But rarely did Shadow ever voice *any* uncertainty over his plans, hare brained or not. Buck shook the fear from his head, it would do no one any good now.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “But if it doesn’t, we’ll figure out another way. Always do.”

Shadow sighed, the tension easing from his shoulders ever so slightly. Sometimes, it was good to be reminded of the indomitable spirit the hero possessed.

The machinery around them began to hum, the tell-tale signs of chaos crackling along the metal wiring. The two hedgehogs turned back to Eggman, the doctor lost in his ramblings to both Cubot and Orbot.

“Preparing to fire the laser, get Tails on the communicator.”

Fiddling with the amplified communicator Tails had handed him before they’d left, Buck opened up a channel. Almost immediately, Tails’ voice buzzed through.

“Everything ready?”

“Waiting for the all clear on your side, buddy.”

“We’re ready. Fire at will. And… good luck, Sonic. Shadow.” Buck blinked. He hadn’t heard his name in a little over two days now.

Before he could answer, the channel cut off and the hero turned to nod at Eggman.

The space around them hummed, the low noise growing to a howl as the machinery activated.

The ray drew on the power of the emeralds, a total of seven brought

in between Buck and BB's dimension. It had been all they could do to find these, praying that the slapdash nature of the plan would work against all odds. Energy crackled, pure light and life, the raw power palpable even through layers of steel and glass, capable of burning and restoring.

Buck and Shadow closed their eyes, reaching out to guide the energy. Chaos was, by its very nature, chaotic; capable of unimaginable harm or breathtaking good, depending on the user's thoughts and intentions.

Shutting out all uncertainty, they tended to it, feeding the growing pulses of energy thoughts of healing, restoration, of *life.* The pulses grew stronger, nearly uncontainable by the machinery now, the force of it nearly melting the metal that tried to channel it.

Before the last pulse could rend the machinery apart, the beam was shot, massive and powerful, straight towards the planet below. It cracked down at impossible speeds, the stream of energy humming on a level deeper than their ears could comprehend and the room was washed with pure light, blinding the three until it finally passed.

They watched the energy of seven emeralds crackle down through the planet, the deep hum shifting into something that sounded almost like a harmony…

…before fizzling out like a dead battery.

Wachowski was screaming.

Everyone had seen and felt the pulse, watching as it lit up the sky and poured into the planet. For a moment, nothing had happened. Then it'd all come undone.

The weak but steady beeping of Scarfz' monitor had turned into a wailing flatline and Wachowski was *screaming.*

He had *felt* it. He'd felt the energy surge through the earth before washing out, felt the little candle of chaos within Scarfz spark for one

beautiful, hopeful moment, and he had *felt* as it snuffed out within the hedgehog, the agonizing emptiness too vivid through their connection and stealing the breath from his very lungs.

Scarfz' body seized for one horrifying moment, muscles tense, face contorted with pain and fear, before falling slack on the bed. That was when the screaming began.

Blue energy crackled around Wachowski, chaotic and dark. Whipped into a desperate frenzy it streaked through his body, burning and rebelling against reason. The hedgehog was vaguely aware of it, attempting to reign it in, but for all the good it did he may as well have been trying to grab lightning.

Instead, he poured it all, every single bit into Scarfz because *this could not be real* . His friend's body convulsed with the force of the energy around him, chest arching up from the sheer amount of energy being forced in and the faint smell of singed fur tainted the air from where his burning hands met Scarfz's arms.

More, he needs more…!

The voice hardly sounded like his own, deep and insistent. Sobbing Wachowski reached in deeper to give more. It hurt. The chaos crackled through him, snapping and singing in a destructive melody. But it was *his* and he was going to *make it heal his friend.*

In a burst of renewed light, arcs of lightning crackled out before curving with an angular grace towards the still body. It struck him with the force of a blast, the energy alighting in his fur, body straining under the onslaught.

In a terrifying moment of clarity, Wachowski realized this much energy could very well kill Scarfz. It's immediately drowned out by a deep boom that echoed with the crackling lightning around him.

Not dead, not dead, still a bit not dead…!

He could see nothing. Hear nothing.. A false silence pounding in his ears. The energy hummed, discord marring what should have been harmony.

Something sparked.

"STOP!" Tails' scream suddenly cut through the air beside him. Something struck his side where the chaos sparked out and latched

on, followed by a sharp yelp of pain.

Wachowski's eyes snapped open, a frigid cold blue.

The fox was on the ground cradling his hands, face stretched in horror. With a sob Wachowski clamped down on the energy, cutting it off entirely. Scarfz' body flopped down limply back onto the mattress, eyes wide and unseeing. Wachowski stared at Tails, both their muzzles streaked in tears, trying to work out what to say, how to explain.

Green eyes flicked down to his blackened gloves, to the singed areas of Scarfz body and the burn on Tails' hands, the realization of what had happened threatening to constrict the air from his lungs..

Did I... do that…?

The voice was his own now, pitching in terror. But he hardly had a moment to begin to apologize before Tails' head snapped to the monitors surrounding Scarfz' bed.

The wailing machine was silenced for a blessed moment before starting up, a beat picking up once more. Between them Scarfz' eyes fluttered, the hedgehog startling them as he took in a deep gasping breath.

Blinking dazedly for a moment, he turned to see Tails and Wachowski's tear streaked faces, and frowned slightly.

"Sorry kid, guess I dozed off."

Wachowski nodded mechanically, reaching out to take his hands and feel fingers curl around his own. How could he tell Scarfz that he hadn't dozed off, but flat-lined for five terrible, *horrifying* seconds…

As if sensing his thoughts, Scarfz squeezed back, weak but alive.

Alive.

The word reverberated in Wachowski's mind, voice echoing distinctly, sounding... fragmented. He could tell now.

It didn't sound like him.

That wasn't his voice.

Chapter End Notes

Thank y'all for reading!

Ren and Fourth, heart eyes motherfuckers.

TharkFlark1 deserves all the praise for beta-ing, please check out their stuff, they're insanely skilled.

There's so much I want to say, this world is so much bigger than we've seen so far, and with luck, I'll be able to share it with y'all.

With such a serious ending, all I can say is. Tags don't lie.

Bring Me Your Heart

Chapter Summary

Time is running out, what's the answer?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shadow had first emerged in the middle of a cold, desert night. The containment parameters of his pod must have been breached somehow, the most likely culprit being the extreme weather of the scorched land.

He remembered catching glimpses of the blue planet in the facility. The hissing of decompressed air as his pod filled with the stasis fluid, and looking upward to see flashes of blood on Mari-

No. He didn't remember.

His pod had cracked. *That* was the first thing he remembered. The tiniest crack bringing with it the first waves of wakefulness. He didn't wake all at once, consciousness instead creeping over him with glacial intent. The rapid shifts in temperature of the desert over the decades must have worn down the pod meant to contain him. It'd landed in the wake of a ruined lab, the back up coordinates should the system ever be compromised. He woke slowly, the fluid of the stasis pod in his lungs, keeping them still and intact.

After a couple months of the groggy in between wakefulness and sleep, he'd finally managed enough energy to punch through.

His body had slumped over the jagged glass, falling limply on the frigid metal railing that criss crossed most of the facility. Shadow remembered laying there as his body's systems remembered their purpose and actions, activating slowly.

Breathing had been one of the firsts. A painful one.

Hacking up fluid felt like coming to life. It wasn't peaceful (had never been for him), it was violent and visceral, panic gripping him as he couldn't breathe until it had all been removed. But that first breath of cold desert air had still been the most beautiful relief he'd ever felt.

Through pain comes glory , the old saying had echoed dimly in his head, whispers of the past.

Shadow grit his teeth as he remembered.

He *hated* that saying.

Sluggishly, Shadow's mind returned to the present, shaking off the old memories best left forgotten. Groaning, he rolled onto his back, blinking away the spots that lingered in his vision from the kid's lightning display.

The beam that had shot down from the doctor's ship had been magnificent, he couldn't deny that. Blinding light and energy swirling down in a whirlpool frenzy of rainbow lights and power. But the *moment* it had struck the earth Shadow had felt as if his very soul were being flayed alive. It was all energy; no life and no healing. It scorched him dry, burning through his own modest reserves. Reserves that had taken longer and longer to replenish in the past couple of weeks.

Gods…. He could only imagine what it had felt like to an already weakened Sonic..

Agreeing to help had never been something Shadow had planned to do. He still wasn't sure why he'd agreed. It didn't make any sense, least of all to him.

The ground was cold and hard beneath him, but he'd woken up on the ground from experiments many times before. It no longer frightened him.

Shadow could hear the commotion around him, his eyelids growing heavy. Automatically, he ran a quick check of his body. Fingers and limbs were good, slow to respond but good. Nothing was broken. His body was sore, as if he'd just been in a serious sparring match (or had been electrocuted).

Forcing himself onto his side, Shadow began the process of trying to get back up.

The descent back to the planet was a silent one, the quiet unbroken in the face of their failure. But the moment the hatch doors hissed open, crisp air flooding through the small carrier, pandemonium ruled.

“Buck!” Tails rushed forward, gripping him hard. His own face was twisted in anguish, eyes bright with unshed tears. “Please, I don’t know what happened. Sonic and Shadow-”

“GET MADDIE” Buck and Shadow recognized the scream as Wachowski, the boyish voice distorted by terror.

“What’s going-” Through the darkness Buck could scarcely make out any shapes, until a dark head turned towards him, cobalt eyes sparking like lightning. In their dim light, Buck caught a glimpse, Shadow stiffening in horror as his keen eyes picked up the scene.

Scarfz’ still body on the bed, his Shadow collapsed in a corner.

“You heard him, get Maddie!”

Buck fumbled for a moment, reaching in his quills for the emerald before remembering he didn’t have it.

“I’ll go.” Shadow said lowly, an emerald already in hand. It was the one he had originally arrived with, managing to grab it from its capsule before the others had blinked out of existence, presumably returning to their original dimension.

The next couple of minutes streaked by in a flurry of motion. Wachowski’s face remained buried into Scarfz’ side, the older hedgehog looking a whisper away from crumbling into the humid air, fur matted with sweat, darkened in places as if burned, and brow furrowed in pain and discomfort. The hedgehog was awake, but hardly present at all.

Near the corner of the room, dragging himself into a sitting position, was Scarfz’ Shadow, looking worse for wear. Buck moved towards him, noting that the other hedgehog looked like he’d just run a marathon for days. But before he made it even halfway across the hangar the now-familiar punch of a chaos control emanated from the center of the room.

Shadow materialized in a brief flash of light, face grim, and with a human woman holding onto his hand in a white-knuckled grip. She looked around frantically the moment her eyes adjusted, a name on her lips. Finally, the boy moved.

“*Mom!* ” He cried out, still holding onto Scarfz, blue energy crackling faintly. Maddie all but sprinted to him, stopping at the bedside. Wachowski threw his arms around her, melting into the powerful embrace, before jerking back and reaching for Scarfz again, a guilty look flashing across his face. Pressing a brief kiss and nuzzle to his head, Maddie sprung into action, setting a black canvas bag on the work table beside the bed.

“What happened?” Her tone was brisk, professional. Wachowski scrubbed at his face, brow scrunching in frustration.

“I don’t know! He was coughing, like he couldn’t breathe. They said the doctor had stabilized him but then he the machine stopped beeping and I felt it spark out and I woke him up-”

Maddie whipped around to look at him. “What?”

Wachowski seemed to shrink into himself, as if he’d done something wrong. “I woke him up?”

It took her a moment to connect the dots. Scarfz had flatlined. And her Sonic had ‘woken him up’...

Oh.

Nodding once, she attempted to smile, heart twisting in her throat. “That was a very brave thing you did, Sonic. I’m proud of you. But right now, I need you to go with Shadow. Maybe outside for a little bit-”

“No mom, you don’t understand he *needs* me-”

Maddie wanted to put her foot down then and there, send him away before he could see anything more than what he already had. But she simply didn’t know enough about the situation, she didn't have the entire picture.

To her left, she turned to see Tails, a myriad of emotions crossing her face as she took in the taller, exhausted and burned form of the fox. A far cry from the worried, but unharmed fox kit she’d left back home only minutes ago. It took her a second longer to regain her composure.

“I need to know exactly what happened. Bring the doctor, or whoever was keeping an eye on him beforehand.”

Thankfully, this Tails quickly nodded and grabbed what looked like a portable screen off the table, dutifully reciting what he knew as he gestured for a figure that was behind her. Maddie remained impassive as she considered the information she was given.

Fluid in his lungs, seizure, heart failure.

“I managed to get him stable before we left.” Dr. Eggman added as Tails took a brief pause stepping closer to the monitor that logged Scarfz’ vitals.

Again, the doctor seemed to slip into the cooler persona, outbursts and jabs nonexistent as he pored over the information on the scanner.

Maddie eyed him coldly, the ice in her eyes halting the doctor dead in his tracks. Without a word, she extended her hand for the results he was holding, snatching them out of his hands when he failed to move quick enough.

“And?”

Eggman looked to Tails for help, but the fox seemed equally confused. They both winced as Maddie turned sharply to level a glare at the taller man.

“*And?* Or am I supposed to read your mind as well, *doctor?* ”

Eggman’s mustache twitched. “No.” He replied, the word strained. “The immediate readings after the blast were peculiar. If you’ll see here, there was a huge dip…”

Buck stepped away from the two, tuning out the finer details as he looked around for Scarfz’ Shadow. Sidestepping the two humans, he quickly made his way to the corner he’d last seen him in.

Shadow was still on the floor, trying to rise shakily on two arms.The hedgehog at least seemed aware of his surroundings, scowling once he caught sight of Buck. Moving swiftly, Buck knelt beside this Shadow.

“Shads? Hey man, you okay?” But before he could even touch him Shadow jerked back, breathing harshly.

“I’m fine.” He hissed. “Just… drained. I’ll be fine.”

Buck frowned, doubting very much that the other was fine. He turned to the group gathered around Scarfz’ bed.

“Yo Wachowski! Can you spare some juice for Shadow? I think the blast might have affected him too.”

On the ground, Shadow snorted, bracing himself on his forearms. Buck frowned in concern, but didn’t reach out to offer help again.

“Hey don’t force yourself, just wait for the kid-”

“I’m the Ultimate Lifeform,” Shadow spat, “I’ve endured energy drainage and more before.”

Buck frowned. What the hell did that mean?

Not for the first time, Buck wondered if this Shadow was more different than similar to his own. But before he could ask any questions, Wachowski had arrived, wiping at his eyes quickly with his forearms.

“Hi,” the boy greeted quickly, extending a hand towards Shadow, stopping when he saw the dark hedgehog look up at him, glancing between the burned gloves and the boy’s tear streaked muzzle. “It won’t hurt,” he quietly assured the silent question he read in the black hedgehog’s eyes.

“I’m not afraid of pain. Just get it over with.” Gingerly, as if to be sure the other was watching, Wachowski’s palm met Shadow’s shoulder. The black hedgehog tensed momentarily before relaxing. It wasn’t painful, it was just…. Warm. Heady and overpowering, like a drink going down too fast. He winced as the energy lanced through his system, feeling more like a frayed wire than a healed hedgehog.

Coughing once, Shadow shook the hand off, shaking his head. “Stop. That’s enough, I can’t filter anything more.”

Wachowski pulled back, looking between his hand and Shadow in confusion. “Why?” He asked, He’d barely transferred any over. Scarfz had taken much more over the past couple of days.

But Shadow only shrugged, furrowing his brow in concentration. Sifting through the kid’s energy was like reaching through a roaring current, hardly anything was compatible. “It feels wrong.”

Buck watched him sharply. “It feels wrong?” He echoed, leaning in closer. Shadow rolled his eyes at that, looking very much like he’d throw a punch at Buck once he had the energy.

“Harmonizing his chaos energy to fit my own body is not as simple as you may think, hedgehog.”

Alarm was blooming slowly in Buck’s gaze as he looked between Shadow, Wachowski, and Scarfz, but before he could ask any questions, Tails was calling them over.

“Hey, wait a second little bud I think-”

“Oh, one moment Buck I’m just trying to make sense of these readings. Scarfz’ energy has had the weirdest patterns lately… kinda familiar…”

“Yeah, about that. Look I just talked to Shadow and I think-”

“Tails, have you been giving him adrenaline?” Maddie suddenly took the scanner from the fox, staring at it intently. “Or any other kind of drug?”

“What?” Tails balked. “Of course not! The only thing he’s gotten has been…”

“Chaos energy.” Buck finished the sentence. All eyes turned to him at that moment.

And then it made sense. The incompatibility. The strange spikes in usage. Wachowski’s energy *had* helped Scarfz, but a body couldn’t live off of adrenaline. It had to crash. It had to shut down.

“His body is reacting like it’s a drug.” Maddie stated, putting the pad down, leaning against the work table.

“What the hell does that mean?” Buck’s Shadow cut in.

“Like adrenaline.” Maddie explained, hands gesticulating faintly. “It helps, for a moment, but it burns through all your reserved strength and you crash. That’s why Scarfz was fine for a bit before-”

Buck saw the moment in which *his* Shadow processed the information, the careful neutrality in his eyes that meant the dark hedgehog was pulling away from the moment. The transference of energy had been his Shadow’s idea, based on his own knowledge of chaos energy. He’d put it forward, had asked the kid to do it, had inadvertently caused Scarfz to burn through whatever scraps he’d had.

The taller Shadow stepped forward then, understanding alight in his eyes.

“That’s why the kid’s energy felt wrong. Because it *is* wrong, for us. There’s no harmony, it doesn't fit.” He laughed then, a cold, humorless bark that echoed in the hangar. “Have you been drugging him this entire time without even knowing?”

“Hey,” Buck stepped forward, quills bristling defensively. “We couldn’t have known we only-”

“So I’ve been hurting him.” And it’s not a question, but their eyes snapped to Wachowski either way as he spoke, eyes trained firmly on his burned gloves.

Understanding dawned on Buck and Shadow as they realized what they had done.

What they’d asked Wachowski to do.

Wachowski could hear the sound of his own breathing in his ears grow to a deafening volume. He had to leave. Now.

Few eyes could follow his form as he raced out of the room, Maddie calling out after him before he had even moved.

The smaller Shadow began to move after him, his skates hissing with energy, before a hand on his shoulder stopped him. He turned to see Buck, face set in a frown, green eyes hard.

“Don’t… I’ll go.”

And in a similar streak of blue, the hero was gone.

Sonic the Hedgehog needed quick reflexes and reaction skills to be able to run at the speeds he did without crashing into something as simple as a tree.

Right now, all of Buck’s skills were being put to the test as he raced after the kid. Wachowski was *fast* . The miles disappeared beneath his feet in the breadth of seconds, Buck trailing behind him.

Truthfully, Buck was faster under certain circumstances, but a part of him understood that the kid needed this. Needed to move, to get away. So Buck trailed behind, content to follow and watch until it was

time to stop.

They couldn't have run for more than an hour before Wachowski tripped. The kid must not have yet developed a strong, consistent focus while running because it was a rock of all things that broke his flow.

Buck winced at the cry of pain and slowed to a jog as he watched the boy tumble before ducking into a ball to soften the blow. He found him in the center of a wide plain, panting heavily into the earth. Dirt, sweat, and tears streaked across his muzzle. The older hedgehog hung back, waiting to be noticed, steps as silent as a whisper even across the dry grass.

Wachowski sniffled, dragging himself into a sitting position before wiping furiously at his face.

"Stupid." He pressed the heels of his dirtied hands against his eyes, body curling into the movement. "So dumb, so stupid, you only *hurt* -"

Well, that was enough of that.

Buck stepped forward, mindful to be more clumsy than usual, the dry grass crackling beneath his sneakers. "Hey kiddo, glad I finally caught up to you." The lie was smooth, easy.

Wachowski froze for a moment, before turning to give him a baleful glare. "What are you doing here?"

"Came to check up on you," Buck stepped closer, stopping when he saw his other self's shoulders tense, as if in preparation to run again. "You, uh, you wanna talk about it?"

The kid looked away, knees drawing up close, arms wrapped around his legs. "Not really."

Ah. Crap.

"Can I sit down?" At the kid's nod, Buck settled beside him on the grass, mindful to leave plenty of room between the two.

The silence felt ugly, damaging. Buck tugged at the edge of his glove, a nervous habit he'd never broken that left the cuffs of all his gloves loose and open. But out of the corner of his eye, he could see the tension begin to slowly ebb out of Wachowski, the boy relaxing as he realized that it was just Buck. Just him. And he was safe.

“I’m sorry.” Wachowski closed his eyes, tucking his head away as if afraid to look at Buck’s face.

Slowly, Buck stretched out his legs, knocking a sneaker against Wachowski’s space, not quite breaking the bubble yet.

The dull pain on his knees and palms was fading. Wachowski found that most pains and aches generally went away quickly and on their own. He focused his gaze on the dry grass in front of him, unable to see the reaction of his other self. The same expression he might make to himself if he could. Annoyance, anger, *disappointment* .

Some Sonic I am. The thought tasted bitter, welling a fresh batch of tears in his eyes.

Buck said nothing else, sitting beside Wachowski, letting him run through the emotions and thoughts on his own. Something Wachowski was thankful for.

A dark voice streaked across his thoughts suddenly, muffling them like fog rolling in.

….*come… back…*

The whisper was felt more than heard, Wachowski only able to catch the tail end of it. Ice trickled down his spine as he recognized the deep timbre. The same one that had whispered to him as he’d tried to save Scarfz.

Wachowski shoved the thought down, flicking his ears back in his best attempt to block out the sound.

“You okay there, kiddo?” Buck was looking at him now.

“M’fine.” Wachowski muttered, wiggling a finger in his ear.

“You know, you don’t have to pretend with me.” Buck said, softer this time. He leaned back to rest on his palms, peering up into the night sky. The smell of salt and brine drifted across the air. They must have ended up near the coast.

“I’m… you, in a way. I get it. Being the hero is hard.” And when Buck

looked at him, Wachowski believed him.

Bring...m...back...

The words could hardly be made out, silent wail crawling over the plain to settle deep in Wachowski's bones. He fought off a shiver, tucking his body close beneath his arms.

"Have you ever... run into strange stuff?" Even as he asked it, Wachowski thought the question sounded stupid.

"Strange how? I mean. The answer is yes but, you might have to be a bit more specific, bud."

"I don't know, like, just strange. Weird stuff that you didn't know how to deal with. How did you end up dealing with it?" Wachowski pressed his fingers into his knuckles, unconsciously tightening the gloves around his hands.

Buck leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. The two blue hedgehogs sat in the quiet field, silence settling easily this time. It felt good. To tell someone. He had his parents (the word still felt so foreign sometimes) but, telling Buck felt… safe, somehow.

"There's not just one way to handle the stuff that gets thrown at you." Buck finally broke the silence, "Weird stuff is… it seems to be a part of our lives. And over time, you're gonna learn how to rely on friends and your own instincts."

Wachowski mulled that over. Buck was roughly five years older than him. But the difference in experience between them was…. Unfathomable. At his age, Buck had already battled various enemies and even a god, if BB's stories were to be believed. Wachowski was… barely coming into his own. Sure, Robotnik had been every sort of crazy, but it'd been just the *one* crazy scientist. The younger hero didn't have the battle honed instincts of the others. Not yet, at least.

"Strange adventures come with their own price, but you don't have to do this alone." A soft shoulder nudged into him, and Wachowski glanced up to see Buck smiling down at him, gentle and understanding. "We're here for you, all of us, just like you've been there for Scarfz. You've got something special kid, and something gives me the feeling, that you're gonna be the best of all of us."

"But," Wachowski swallowed, looking at his gloves. The palms were darkened, a result of the explosion of chaos energy that had torn from

his body. “I *hurt* him. This whole time. I mean I tried to help but all I ended up doing was-”

“Hey,” the dry grass crackled as Buck shifted his weight to face Wachowski fully. “I can’t lie to you and tell you this doesn’t suck.” Wachowski had to chuckle along with the statement, the light so at odds with the heavy topic. “But we’re all Sonic, right?”

Wachowski’s ears flicked at the name and he nodded reluctantly. “I guess…”

“You guess? Look!” Buck poked his shoulder, plucking gently at blue fur. “How many super fast, blue hedgehogs have you run across before?”Wachowski fought the urge to smile, smoothing his fur down. “I hadn’t really run across any other hedgehogs before meeting you,” he admitted.

Huh.

Buck silently resolved to fix that in the future.

“Well, of course not!” He continued, undeterred. “Because I can assure you, no matter what world we’re in, Sonic the Hedgehog is one of a kind. And it isn’t the speed, it’s not the power, and it isn’t really even the great sense of humor.” He tossed the kid a wink, who had wide eyes trained on him now. “But it's because of the simple fact that we *never* give up.”

In a fluid movement, Buck was on his feet, hand extended to help Wachowski up. “And even now, under everything, you’re still raring to help, aren’t you?”

Wachowski nodded, a bit confused. But Buck was right. Finding out he’d been hurting Scarfz had been awful, but it wouldn’t stop him from trying to help his friend however he could.

“And how do I know that, you may ask?” Buck sounded awfully smug, sleeking his quills back for good measure. “One thing’s pretty clear, once you run into multiple versions of yourself,” he chuckled. “We do our best to protect people. Especially the people we care about.”

Looking at the older speedster, Wachowski could see a glimpse of his own future in Buck’s eyes. Full of peril, fear, friends new and old, hope, and unyielding determination.

It sounded terrifying.

It sounded amazing.

“Our friends count on us and you and I count on our friends. Scarfz is counting on you, just like we’re counting on him to hold on.” A gloved fist reached out to nudge his shoulder gently. “So don’t quit trying, Wachowski. Because *that’s* the only time you’ll ever lose.”

Images of red spines, a golden ring, and brown feathers flashed across Wachowski’s mind. He sighed, looking down at his hands.

“I’ve already lost someone. Longclaw she… did you have Longclaw?” Wachowski saw Buck shake his head slightly.

“Was she important to you?”

“Yeah she was my… she was very important to me. Tom and Maddie tell me it’s not my fault, the echidna’s attacked us.” The kid missed the shock that struck across the older hedgehog’s face. “But. Sometimes, I can’t help but think-”

“That you could have done better.” Buck finished quietly.

Wachowski nodded. “I *know* I could have. And Scarfz now. I-I can’t Buck. I can’t lose him too. Not after I’ve hurt him like this-” And why did it suddenly feel so hard to breathe. “Buck what if he dies because of what I did? What if I *killed* -”

“Do you want to know the hardest thing about being a hero is?” Buck’s voice was quiet, so quiet. He chuckled. “A hero. Sometimes I can’t believe that’s the word they use, but it’s there isn’t it?”

“I’m no hero.” Wachowski scoffed.

“You saved your family. That’s pretty heroic.”

“That was just-”

“Nuh uh, you protected and defended your home, your family. Longclaw. And the hardest part is that you can’t save everyone. No matter how hard we try sometimes.” Buck looked at him again. “I lost… a lot of people. And it doesn’t get easier. I remember them. All of them.”

“Do you blame yourself too?” The concept seemed so alien to Wachowski. Buck seemed so confident, so self assured. Always smiling and cracking jokes.

The other hedgehog nodded, the gesture so slight he might have missed it. His eyes weren't laughing now, the slight curve of his smile was the last piece of the shield he bore.

"Sometimes." Buck admitted. "It's hard not to. But you need to accept the possibility that not everyone in the world can be saved. That our best, whether we like it or not, is all we can give." He looked up towards the dark sky and sighed. "So we give it all we got. We face things head on."

Wachowski's thoughts trickled back to the creeping whisper, the chill it had brought him as it echoed in his mind. The fear he'd felt as he'd run away, tried to escape the unknown. He took a deep breath, making a choice in that moment.

"I. I've been hearing a voice." The moment the words were out his mouth he regretted them, wincing at how *crazy* he sounded.

But Buck only hummed, looking thoughtful. "This is a pretty weird place," he admitted. "Mind telling me what kind of voice?"

"I'm not sure… I heard it when… after you shot the energy at the planet. Maybe a couple of times before? It always seems to come from that direction." He pointed across the field, into the darkness.

For a moment, Buck said nothing, the hero deep in thought. Wachowski found himself feeling a lot less afraid than he'd been before, the chill brought on by the voice having been chased away by Buck's words. He stared up at the bright, cold stars, content to wait for the moment.

"I can't say I have an answer as to what it is, but I'm glad you told me. I think we're all gonna have to be on our toes if we want to make it through."

This was...as the kids say… not good.

Buck hadn't felt terribly alarmed when Wachowski had told him about the voice. Sure, it wasn't a *good* thing but he trusted the kid's sense of self so far to rule out anything funky. Wachowski's innate connection

to chaos energy was a mystery. It could very well give him an insight to this place no one else had. But when he'd pointed in the direction he'd been hearing it…

Straight towards Angel Island.

With all the adventures he had been through, Buck was no stranger to disembodied voices. They weren't always dangerous, but he couldn't help feeling on edge. It could all very well be a coincidence, but in his experience, that was often a paltry excuse. They were missing part of a puzzle, he just knew it.

He only hoped they could figure it out before it was too late.

"You about ready to head back?" He asked lightly, leaning into a stretch to warm up his legs again. Wachowski nodded back firmly, jogging in place briefly.

"Yeah, I kinda wish I hadn't run out so far," the kid frowned at the direction they'd come from. They *had* certainly gone far. Skirted around the edges of a desert at some point.

"Think about it as round 2," Buck's eyes gleamed with the new challenge. "And kid or not, I *will* leave you in the dust."

Wachowski burst into a short laugh, pointing at Buck boldly.

"You're on, old timer!"

Buck spluttered into the suddenly empty space where a blue hedgehog had once stood, before streaking off in pursuit, sneakers digging into the earth faster and faster as he picked up speed.

"I'll show you old!"

Wachowski's laughter ran over the plains and into the night.

The evening light had given way to deep pink hues when the beam of energy had struck the ground, the planet sparking for a moment. Amy, Tails, and even Tucker had all felt… something. Like the whisper of a

breeze in a still, suffocating basement, but it'd died as quickly as it'd come.

But the echidnas had sensed the beam even as it arched down towards the planet. Even Tikal, gasping harshly when the energy surged through the earth, exploding outwards in powerful echoes, had narrowed her eyes at the foreign sensation. But Knuckles had had to brace himself against the tree, the bandages on his hands catching on the tree bark. It had felt like slamming a sword against metal, vibrations ringing through his limbs to finally die in his core, wrong and disharmonic.

It hadn't taken.

He'd known it before he'd opened his eyes and looked up at Amy's face, crouched over her communicator.

The situation had hardly changed. Except now they were stuck on this island.

"We'll keep looking on our end Tails, don't worry about us right now, okay? Stay with Sonic. Send a plane in the morning." Already, Knuckles could see the gears turning in her head, and he had to stop again and admire the strength of his friend.

The group had settled around the campfire, Tucker and Tikal joining them. As Knuckles had foraged briefly for food on the island he was struck by how much it reminded him of when he was young foraging food for himself. He'd met Amy in a jungle too.

Dinner was a quiet and quick affair. The fire crackled low, lending the night air a peaceful glow. But there was little peace felt with the cloud that hung over the group.

"We should have known." The shorter Knuckles sighed after the silence had turned suffocating, chin resting on a palm as he peered into the fire. The remains of their simple dinner had already vanished. The energy had felt right to him… but part of it had been from his own world. "We should have known the energy wouldn't be compatible. We almost-

"Sonic is alive." Amy cut in firmly, startling the other out of his self-imposed reverie. Her green eyes were hard, and the resistance leader could see how strong she was trying to be in that moment.

"You're right." He nodded. "We gotta pick up and keep trying." His

own Sonic might kick his ass if he saw him giving up Or worse. Taunt him for it.

Beside him, the taller Knuckles was tugging off the gloves he'd been lent. They'd aided immensely in fusing the large gem, but were more cumbersome now than anything.

Maybe, if he had grown up wearing them, they might feel more natural to his hands. His counterpart accepted them with a nod, black tipped hands disappearing once more behind the thick, white fabric.

"What's next then?" he asked, head cocked as if listening for something.

"Tails didn't say anything about any new plan. I told him we'd keep looking here." Amy sighed, shuffling close to the fire.

Rolling off the treetops Knuckles could smell the fresh scent of rain incoming.They had all settled easily into subtly created burrows/ indents in the dirt, reminiscent of their early years when they had survived as children in the wild. But they would offer no shelter from the rain.

"Uh, we should consider finding shelter soon guys." Knuckles tugged at his bandages again. "Rain's coming soon."

"Oh yeah." The shorter red echidna raised his nose to the air. "I can smell it too."

"The library should be a good spot," Tikal murmured. "You might even be able to continue searching for answers for your friend."

"Good idea," Amy smiled at the new echidna warmly. "I promised Tails that we'd keep looking for answers and we're lucky to have U.T. but he can only work through so may scrolls."

"I'm actually able to read a little bit of the ancient echidna language." Emboldened, Tikal leaned forward, ignoring the disapproving frown of her father.

"Really?! That's amazing!" Amy lit up at that. "Could you help us? Even if it's just to work out what material might not be worth translating, it'd cut down the time needed by a lot."

"Of course, my understanding of it is rudimentary, but I can make out basic words and even some sentences. My father taught me what I

know."

"I can't believe you know a whole other language." The taller Knuckles gaped, his shorter counterpart looking slightly intrigued beside him as well.

Flustered by the compliments, Tikal rocked back on her heels, the air cooling her skin. "It's really nothing special, but I'd be honored to help you." She turned to Knuckles then, the taller echidna perking up as she faced him. "It's your language too, Knuckles. I'd be happy to teach you what I know. Granted, it's nothing very advanced, but-"

"Yeah! That'd be awesome." He beamed back, "Oh boy and Tails will explode when I learn to read a language he can't read." Knuckles snickered, already imagining the look on the fox's face.

"May I ask," Amy spoke up, looking interested but suddenly shocked as all eyes turned to her. "Tucker, how do you know so much about the echidna tribe? All Tikal has been able to say is what you've taught her and I suppose I'm just curious."

The turtle smiled at her, lips pursing as he pondered the question, weighing the words to say.

"As you know, I worked with the ancients, long ago." He adjusted his straw hat, breaking her gaze. "I worked in a… research facility." Gnarled hands reached for the pouch at his side, but the turtle smiled at Amy wearily. "I knew the echidna tribe well, the things I learned… I did my best to pass on, that's all."

Amy returned his smile, rising up when Tikal suggested they find some shelter before the rain hit.

Suspicious violet eyes stayed trained on the old turtle however. Knuckles had had to learn many things since first leaving his floating island when Sonic and Tails had crash landed onto it many years ago. It was this knowledge that made him so certain of something.

The turtle was hiding something else.

The smell of ancient paper hung in the air, the glow of the sun through the skylights long since dimmed.

Knuckles had managed to find some old torches, setting some sconces near Amy's work area in order to be better able to see. Her and the other two Knuckles had opted to spend the night inside the library, keen on learning all they could before the break of day brought with it another tragedy.

Tucker and Tikal had decided to join them after all, their campground smothered out by the sudden squall. The two kept their distance, however, the warm light of the sconces and gentle patter of the rain lending the room a surreal atmosphere. In the dimness, they could imagine this was simply an evening in the library, where an echidna scholar or student might walk through the doors and join their table at any given moment.

It was strange.

As if history was trying to come alive. What was it Tikal had said about the Emerald?

There's something there. Alive.

Shaking the strange feeling, Knuckles picked up the electronic scanner pad Tails had left behind. UT's translations had been uploaded to it, to make the work easier. Not being able to read had never really bothered him, but seeing Buck's and his Knuckles' reaction to that had left him feeling… bad.

The symbols on the screen meant nothing to him. He scrolled through the documents mournfully, the knowledge of his people eluding him even now.

"You okay, Knuckles?" Amy's voice came near his side.

"Yeah! Just fine. Just… wondering, y'know?"

The pink hedgehog hummed thoughtfully, hands extended for the electronic pad. Knuckles didn't hesitate to hand it to her. Knowing him, he'd probably break it the first chance he-

"Would you like me to read to you?"

Knuckles looked at her in surprise, expecting to see a teasing smile, or mocking grin, but Amy's looked only curious.

“That’d be real nice of you, Ames.” He smiled sincerely, settling down on the floor.

“Nah,” she scoffed, scrolling deftly through the pad. “It’s what friends are for. Now, any requests in particular? I doubt you’d be interested in,” she leaned in to squint at the pad, “foreign military affairs? Yuck.”

Turning to the other Knuckles, Amy handed him an extra pad. “Here! Read up and see if you can find anything interesting while I read to Knuckles for a bit.”

Snorting in amusement, Knuckles took the device from her. “Chaos, clearly bossiness runs in all Amy’s.”

Suddenly, his face was full of pink hedgehog. “I’ve been meaning to ask! What’s your Amy like? Strong? Powerful? Indepe-”

“Hey! Interrogate later!” Knuckles tugged on the hem of her dress, looking to all the world like a giant pouting baby, in Amy’s opinion. She sighed heavily.

“*Fine.* What kind of story then?”

“Anything not boring.”

“Hm…” There was that odd work of fiction Tails had mentioned right before they’d gotten the call from Sticks. The call that Sonic was dying.

Immediately, she shut the thought out. *Keep it cool, Amy. Just find the story.*

It didn’t take too long to find it. With Knuckles settled she opened the file and began to read.

Tikal wrapped her damp shawl around her shoulders, shivering slightly in the stillness of the room. She had not expected to ever run across another echidna in her life. Her father had told her from an early age that most of the remains of the civilization had either been hunted down or fallen while hunting the dregs of his own people.

Despite this, finding the tall echidna had felt… right. Like meeting a long lost family member she had only ever vaguely been aware of, only heard of from second hand stories.

The other echidna however… Tikal kept her gaze trained on the flickering flames of the sconce, inching closer to ward off the chill. The shorter of the two echidna's would not stop staring at her, gaze unreadable for the most part. He had been the one to announce that she shouldn't be alive…

He must think I can't notice , she thought, amused for a moment. But Tikal had grown up on the run her whole life and was an expert in noticing the smallest of details. Her father raised her, taking them from village to village, rarely staying in one place longer than two years. It had been a hard life for a puggle, but she had had her father, and he had given her the stories.

Beside her, her father slept lightly, the turtle's head leaning forward against his shell. Tucker had been alive for over one thousand years, there when it all began and fell apart. He had told her wondrous stories about her people, their culture, their advances. It had felt as if they were still alive and waiting to welcome her back home, back to where she truly belonged.

They were nestled against the side of a massive stone bookcase, the sconce embedded in the stone blazing brightly. The warmth was scant, but welcome. The coolness of the library had been a welcome reprieve in the heat of the day, but now the chill threatened to pierce her fur, her wet clothes not helping much. In the center of the library, the pink hedgehog's voice was reading steadily.

Amy, her mind provided helpfully.

Tikal listened in, something about the words sounding familiar…

"… and when the speakers arrived, the city rejoiced. Their world was fragile and dying, the last embers threatening to flicker out. But the star speakers were healers, so our People welcomed them as brethren, a sibling race."

The shorter of the two knuckles was leaning back in a wooden chair, scrolling through an electronic scanner silently. The tallest one was laid out on the floor, eyes half-lidded as he listened to the pink hedgehog.

"There were two, chosen among the star speakers, who came to heal

their world. Chaos walked among them, lending them his power in exchange for a-"

"Body." Tikal finished the sentence, quiet voice ringing through the hall. The trio looked at her curiously, the spell woven by the storytelling now broken. "I know that story."

Getting up quietly, so as to not disturb her father, Tikal approached them. She chose to kneel on the ground beside the taller echidna, settling more comfortably as they stared at her for a beat longer.

"It's an old story," Amy told her, glancing at the scanner.

"Yes," Tikal nodded, leaning forward curiously. "My father told me about it, the pact between Chaos and the star speakers, the friendship between my people and the speakers." Tikal sighed, the sweet smell of ancient parchment lighting a small glimpse of the past. "It sounded so magical, so fantastic."

"Would you like to tell us the story?" Amy asked her, breaking the gentle mirage. Tikal shook her head however, a small smile on her lips as she leaned back.

"No, I've never heard the story from the direct source. Please, Miss Amy, continue." The orange echidna was aware of eyes on her, the short echidna again. Looking at him, she was surprised to see he didn't glance away, but instead continued to stare. His expression fell ever so slightly as he glanced at her hands and brow.

After a moment, he returned to his own scanner. Tikal said nothing, giving her attention to Amy, who had continued reading from the translations.

Clearing her throat daintily, Amy reached for the water bottle she had tucked away in her pack.

"Oh!" Tikal suddenly felt very embarrassed. "I'm so sorry Miss Amy, you don't have to keep reading. It was wonderful to hear, nonetheless." She looked fondly at the book in the pink hedgehog's hands. "I never thought I might hear the myths from the source itself."

“Those stories are no myths.” As one, they turned to see the elderly turtle carefully rise to his feet. He blinked at the sudden attention, smiling apologetically.

“Forgive me, I was listening in.”

“Do you know something we don’t, old man?” The shorter echidna narrowed his eyes at the turtle. Ever since they’d met he couldn’t shake the feeling that the turtle was hiding something. Something big.

“The star speakers were common knowledge when I was younger,” Tucker offered easily. “Their healing prowess was known by nearly everyone. But, I’m not surprised they fell into myth and folklore,” he sighed, idly reaching for the medallion he wore. “They specialized in healing with energy. It all sounds rather fantastical after a couple generations.”

Knuckles all but growled, the shorter echidna gripping the scanner in his gloves. “Did you say *energy healing?”*

Tucker looked taken aback, recovering swiftly. “Yes… I did.”

“Knux,” Amy placed her hand on his arm, and the misplaced anger fled his body at the voice of the pink hedgehog. This Amy was less brusque than his own, but he still heard the warning in her tone. “He didn’t know. We never explained what was actually wrong with him.”

Knuckles only snorted, looking away. Amy turned to Tucker then.

“If what you say is true, then do you think the star speakers’ knowledge could help? Our Sonic, something’s wrong. He’s been losing too much energy, chaos energy.”

Tucker stilled, hands shaking ever so slightly that anyone might have missed it. Knuckles, however, zeroed in on the turtle.

“I think so,” he whispered. “They first came here to heal our dying world, after all. Maybe there’s a book of healing somewhere here...” He broke Amy’s gaze, adjusting his own shawl and medallion.

But Amy didn’t notice his odd reaction, already bursting into movement at his confirmation, easily shaking off her own tiredness.

“In that case, we need to be quick! We need to find everything they have on the star speakers!”

Even Tikal moved to help, ushering her reluctant father down one of the many stone shelves. She carefully sorted through the scrolls and tomes, sounding out the strange syllables she could make out.

They searched violently into the wee hours of the night. Any other time Amy would have downed multiple pots of coffee to stay awake, but in the jungle hundreds of miles away from civilization all they had to keep them awake was the burning drive to save their friend.

Surprising everyone but Buck's Knuckles, Tucker was the first one to find something concrete.

The turtle had pulled down a simple, bound book, his attention caught by a brightly colored symbol.

"What luck!" He gasped quietly. "Finding a book written by a star speaker themself." Even as he'd suggested the idea, the thought of finding any written material had seemed unlikely to him.

Ears perking up, Tikal was immediately peering over his shoulder, eyes shining with excitement as she called Amy and the others over.

"So they are true!" At her father's dry amused look, Tikal smiled apologetically, realizing her tone had come across as incredulous despite the years of being told about them.

"Yes, they are. They're very real." He touched the cover of the book forlornly.

"How do you know it's written by a star speaker?" Amy asked, taking the book from the turtle gently.

"The embossed symbol on the spine." He pointed to the brightly stamped symbol, tracing the spiral that marked the book, flecks of red paint still clinging bravely to the leather. "That was their symbol. After many years, the finer details of things are lost to time, but I've never been able to forget that symbol."

"Well? What are you waiting for? Scan it!" The shorter echidna all but barked, but his nervousness was given away by the way he leaned over Amy's shoulder, craning to get a look at the book.

She moved quickly, hands fumbling slightly over U.T's control as the machine scanned the pages. Once he finished she snatched up the pad, eyes skimming over the words that appeared on the screen.

“Well?” Tikal couldn’t help but lean forward as well, the words too far away to make out.

“Okay, I just got it! It seems to be a… diary? Memoir?” Their faces fell collectively.

It was an incredible find, but nothing that would help them in their current straits.

“Oh! Oh wait!” Amy hopped quickly, pointing to a spot on the screen. “Energy… yes! Chaos healing!” She looked up at them, a beaming grin overtaking her. “This star speaker *was* a healer.”

She spent the next couple of minutes reading passages aloud, sometimes stopping altogether to skim a bit further. Finally, she began an entry that ‘was more useful’.

“Today, I received a message from my mother. She’s back home, but the courier was able to bring me a letter. The Sentinel warned us of going back more than needed, apparently our supply of rings is running low, I hope that is remedied soon. This planet’s inhabitants have been nothing but kind, but I am homesick.”

Amy scrolled a bit further, words falling off her tongue smoothly.

“I spent the day healing a portion of this world alongside the Ethereal and his Sentinel. They’re such goofs you’d hardly imagine the amount of chaos they can wield. Trekking up the shrine was such a pain. One of the echidnas standing guard said it was because it was easiest to spread the energy out that way. Like a beacon.

Yeah it sounds like a smart choice but my feet say otherwise!

Healing beside the Emerald is nice, however. Sure, some of the other healers can be distracting, but the chaos that rolls off the emerald is enough to deal with the absence of it in the air. I needed it too! I nearly keeled over walking up the shrine and I swear on Inti I’m in shape!

To be honest. I’m a little worried.

I didn’t put this in my letter home, I didn’t want my mother to worry, but maybe I can keep it here.

Most of us need to visit the emerald once a week now, to regain some of the energy we’re losing. I’ve never been in such a place before. I don’t know why anyone would suck the chaos from a planet but… it feels horrible. The

natives of this planet seem to be handling it better than we are. I hope we're able to fix it soon and leave."

Trailing off into silence, Amy looked up at her audience. She glanced at Tucker, the turtle's brow furrowed and eyes closed as if in pain.

"Should I stop?" She asked quietly, looking between him and Tikal. The orange echidna nodded gently, reaching out to grasp her father's arm.

"What did they mean, by 'sucking the chaos from a planet'?" Knuckles cut in sharply, the shorter echidna's violet gaze boring into the old turtle.

"Knuckles!" Amy hissed, noticing Tucker's wince. But she couldn't say she wasn't curious as well.

But Knuckles didn't back down, staring the ancient turtle down boldly.

"It was you, wasn't it. Your kind."

The turtle was silent for a long while. When he finally looked at the echidna, the look on his face said it all.

"I didn't *know."*

Knuckles stepped forward, aggression in every line of his body.

"I think," he snarled, "you'd better start explaining then."

"It's true." Tucker sighed. He had insisted they sit for this, but Knuckles had fire in his veins, so the resistance leader settled for pacing round the table.

"I was a scientist, there was a… revolutionary discovery. The creation of chaos crystals." His hand gripped the pouch once more. "They were… once I found out what they were." The turtle closed his eyes for a moment, warding off screams of the past.

"Father, you don't have to-"

“I do.” The ancient turtle opened his eyes to give his adopted daughter a weak smile.

“What did the ancients really do?” Amy asked, looking from the pouch to the turtle warily.

“They wanted a way to harness chaos energy. Chaos is life. And when they began to harness more than they should well… the planet began to die.” The turtle spread his palm, gesturing to the space around them.

“When the ancients learned that chaos was in every living thing, they began to draw from the planet itself, not knowing the consequences it would bring. No one knew… at least, that’s what I thought.” He sighed, looking past them to a fallen tapestry, threads of gold and red shining through despite the centuries that had passed.

“The star speakers came to heal the world. The echidna’s welcomed them in peace, and so did the ancients until-”

“Until they realized the chaos energy the star speakers had.” Knuckles finished dryly, finally still from his pacing. “The ancients didn’t care about healing the planet, did they? Those machines out there, those belonged to them, didn’t they?”

“The sentinel machines, yes.” The turtles admitted with a bowed head. “They did. A sect of ancients wanted chaos, but chaos *needs* to be in balance. Drawing from the very planet itself, mining it from living beings…” he looked towards his own pouch. “It ruined everything.”

“The star speakers came to restore the balance of this world and the echidnas welcomed them as friends. I was just a researcher.” Tucker sighed, “But I aided in the slaughter as if I had been a warrior either way. You have to understand.” He croaked, and no one knew who he was truly pleading to. Tucker gazed into the fire, lost amongst time. “It was all I knew. It wasn’t until after…”

The silence stretched out, from seconds, to minutes. The group exchanged concerned glances, but the turtle only gazed into the fire, his daughter reaching out.

Tikal whispered soft words, gently shaking him, as if it’s a routine they had.

After a moment, Tucker blinked and turned to look at her gratefully, before continuing.

“I left.” He said firmly. “After they attacked the echidna city and went after the star speakers, I couldn’t bear to… I spent the rest of my life making up for it.” He shook his head, pulling out an engraved medallion that had been tucked away beneath the folds of his shawl.

“The emblem of the ancients,” he explained at their curious stares. “I wear it as a mark of shame now, something I can never forget or truly make up for.”

“But father taught me everything he could about my people.” Tikal protested, as if this too were an old argument. “Our prayers, our culture, even some of our stories.”

“We don’t have time to argue over blame,” Amy cut in smoothly, shooting the shorter Knuckles a pointed look.

“Fine then,” The resistance leader crossed his arms, staring the pair down. “Let’s just clear a few things up, shall we?”

Knuckles was trying really hard to wrap his head around the situation. His shorter counterpart seemed to be asking more questions with Tikal fielding as many as she could but Knuckles was still stuck thinking about the words of the old diary they had found.

Turning towards the staircase, the echidna wondered if maybe they had gone about solving this all wrong.

He pondered the journal entry they’d just heard, the mystery of the star speakers, as well as the strange, hollow sensation he’d sensed the moment the chaos energy had crashed into the earth only hours earlier. A similar hollowness to Scarfz, if he was remembering right.

Slowly, an idea began to creep into place.

The village was dark and silent by the time the two blue hedgehog's made it back. But both of them moved confidently, their race turning into a friendly jog after Wachowski had eaten dirt for the second time that night.

It didn't escape Buck's attention that the younger hog seemed very at home in the wilderness. Movements more like BB's as he moved through forested areas. By now, Buck had become accustomed to living in a house, but he remembered not having that at some point.

"They're still awake," Wachowski whispered, pointing at the lights still on at Scarfz' hut.

"Looks that way. Come on, your mom must be worried."

Wachowski winced, but nodded, following the older hedgehog inside.

The living room was empty, save for the human woman that Buck knew to be the kid's mom and Sticks, who seemed to be doing her best to stay alive.

"Hey Maddie…. Sticks." Wachowski greeted weakly, shuffling from foot to foot. Maddie jerked up at his voice, relaxing visibly when she saw him.

"Sonic! Honey…" She trailed off briefly, reaching out to him. "Are you alright?"

Wachowski closed the gap between them, melting into the embrace. "Mmhm, sorry for making you worry."

"Oh pssht, me? Worry? No, no, I know my boy." She hugged him a little tighter nonetheless. "I was keeping everyone together. Especially that Tails… poor little guy."

"Oh my gosh!" Wachowski hopped up, looking towards the hallway into the direction of the hangar. "Scarfz. Is he okay? Is Shadow okay?"

"Hey, hey, slow down. Shadow is fine. Weak, but fine for now." She looked at Buck for a moment, and he could tell there was more she wasn't saying. "The nice Shadow is in there with Scarfz, his Tails, and the… less nice Shadow. Scarfz fell asleep awhile ago."

"What about Egghead? And BB?" Buck asked, glancing around. He hadn't seen any machines outside either. Maddie's mouth pressed into a thin line.

“BB’s asleep. The doctor said he’d be back at dawn.” The human sounded unhappy about that, and Buck supposed he couldn’t blame her, considering what he’d gleaned from their own Eggman.

“I’m gonna see Scarfz.” Wachowski stated, not having been unable to look away from the hallway for very long. But before he could get far, Maddie was grasping his arm.

“Are you sure? He’s very hurt, Sonic.”

“I’m sure mom, I need to see him. I can’t give up on him.”

“Honey, I just want to prepare you-”

“For what? Scarf is gonna be *fine* ,” He tugged a little harder.

“Sonic, he’s very hurt and I’ve done all I can.”

Finally, Wachowski stilled, gaze dropping to the ground. His hand curled into a fist briefly before relaxing. Buck felt his heart ache for the kid. Of course he’d experienced loss. Eggman had devastated his world for nearly six months at one point. But it never got easier.

But when Wachowski looked up to meet Maddie’s eyes his gaze was clear and calm, determination blazing beneath the surface so powerfully Buck was floored by its intensity.

“Thank you, for helping.” He told her, curling his own hand to hold hers. “I know he’s not looking too good, but I don’t wanna give up just yet.” The smile that he gave was soft despite the strength it carried.

Maddie nodded stiffly, finally releasing his arm. Wachowski stopped to give her a brief hug, nuzzling her shoulder and breathing in the scent of home.

Flashing his mother a bright smile, he turned down the hallway towards the direction of the hangar Scarfz had been staying in the past couple of days.

Buck followed the kid, shooting the human woman an apologetic glance as he passed her by.

The hanger was dimly lit, Tails leaning against the bare mattress and poring over a bright scanner. The fox glanced up as the two entered.

“Glad to see you two are back.” He said quietly. But despite the silence the words were genuine. Wachowski headed towards Scarfz and Tails, shoulders tense.

Near the mattress Shadow was leaning against a table, a perfectly good chair standing beside him. Buck didn’t bother to hide rolling his eyes, amused at the glare the not-his-Shads shot him.

“You just can’t resist antagonizing another version of me, can you?” His own Shadow spoke up from the corner of the room.

“It’s not as easy anymore with you, let me have this.” Buck chuckled, beaming at the taller Shadow. “But seriously, how you feeling? You looked pretty rough before we left.”

The taller Shadow shifted, avoiding Buck’s gaze with a scowl. “The child’s energy was sufficient. I was able to filter out enough to suit my own body for the time being.”

“Why couldn’t you filter anymore?” Wachowski looked at him, distracted from his own conversation with Tails.

“Because otherwise, I’d end up like him.” Shadow sneered, nodding towards Scarfz. “My body is fine tuned and efficient. Would you expect anything less from the Ultimate Lifeform?”

Behind him, a loud snort sounded out, but by the time they all looked, the other Shadow’s face was perfectly neutral.

“Can you do that for Scarfz?” Wachowski looked excited now. “I can give you the energy and you can filter it for him, right?”

Shadow looked taken aback, the taller hedgehog staring for a beat before shaking his head. “And why should I do that? I’ve helped enough, if you ask me. If Sonic wishes to disgrace himself in this way, I’m not going to try and stop him.”

“You owe Wachowski.” The Buck's Shadow approached the group now, red eyes hard and cold. “He gave you the energy you needed to begin with. And if we’re anything alike, we both know how we feel about standing debts.”

Buck watched the exchange, impressed with the deftness that his own Shadow handled this. How far he’d come.

“He’s responsible for this situation in the first place…” The taller Shadow finally grumbled. “But I will help. As much as I can, anyway. Filtering energy is consuming in its own way. I cannot do it indefinitely.” The words sounded forced, as if he hated to admit this one flaw.

Wachowski, however, clapped his hands delightedly. “Anything is better than nothing! Let’s get to it then.”

It had only been about half an hour that Shadow had been at Scarfz bedside, brow furrowed in intense concentration as he took energy from Wachowski and filtered it towards Scarfz.

Already, the energy was making great strides, stabilizing the blue hedgehog more than medicine could. But the the dark hedgehog was struggling to get him to even this state, the energy too foreign and complex for him to filter with ease.

“Hey. Cut it out.” Shadow watched his taller counterpart consume his own energy almost entirely through the filtering process. Probing the other felt almost like a breach of privacy, but he’d had a hunch his other self might expend himself more than he should. The other hedgehog ignored him, eyes still closed in concentration.

Shadow grit his teeth and breathed slowly before speaking again. “I said, *cut it out* . Your own energy is-”

“I don’t do things halfway, hedgehog.” One eye cracked open to glare at him tiredly. “I can filter more out.”

“And if you do you’ll end up like him.” Shadow jerked his head sharply to Scarfz’ still form. “Don’t be stubborn-”

“Gods, can you two *please* be quiet?” The croak caught everyone’s attention, all eyes snapping to Scarfz, who was now definitely glaring at the two black hedgehogs.

“Shadow. Shadow.” He greeted them curtly, eyes sliding closing as he settled again onto the bare mattress. “Nice to see you two. And as much as I appreciate the whole not ‘destroying your rival’ shtick right now, I *would* like to nap without a pair of deep, angry voices being passive aggressive towards each other.”

“Seems like my effort paid off after all.” The taller Shadow shot his other a smug look, withdrawing his hand from Scarfz and brushing off Wachowski’s hold on his arm.

But before Shadow could snarl out a reply and *wipe that smug look off his face* he was suddenly and expertly sidestepped by Buck, who all but shoved the two Shadows out of his way.

“Scarfz! Buddy! Boy, am I glad to see you awake.”

Scarfz cracked one bleary eye, the edge of his mouth quirking into a smile as he recognized Buck. “Oh, nice to see another good-lookin hedgehog round these parts.”

Buck grinned at him, “I’ll say. You’ve looked better, but I guess handsome is still handsome.”

“Har har,” Scarfz coughed. His eyes glanced down to see Wachowski, staring at him with open happiness. “Oh hey kiddo! I suppose I have you to thank again?”

Wachowski winced, looking between the Shadow of this dimension and Scarfz. “Something like that… Shadow helped this time around too.”

“Hm.” Scarfz pursed his lips, glancing at the darker hedgehog. “Now *that* is surprising news.”

Scowling, Shadow got up from his seat. “Hmph. If I knew you were going to be this ungrateful, Sonic, I would have let your energy bleed out.”

“So I suppose you’ll be wanting a ‘thank you’ card?”

“I wouldn’t be opposed-”

“Okay! Yeesh, banter later, fixing now.” Buck cut in, shooting the two a reproachful stare to little effect. He looked at Scarfz now, gaze turning serious.

“Look bud, you aren’t out of the woods yet. This energy,” he gestured towards the taller Shadow who sniffed primly, “It only buys you some time. We’re still looking for alternatives, so just, hang in there, okay?”

Scarfz looked at Buck. The hedgehog was only a year or two younger than him, but he could see that Buck already had a strong grasp on dire situations, even in this current state. Scarfz grinned as best he could, ignoring the sparks of pain in his body.

“Don’t worry about me, I’m all good.”

Maddie had insisted on giving Scarfz’ Shadow a bed to rest after his own energy expenditure. It didn’t take very long for the hedgehog to fall into a light sleep as well.

Awake in the hanger, Scarfz struggled to fall asleep himself despite the exhaustion and ache that plagued his waking body.

Noise near the entrance caught his attention and the blue hedgehog turned his head to see a familiar silhouette at the entrance. Tails stopped hesitantly, as if he were still a kit of only six years.

“Can’t sleep?” Scarfz asked, his voice barely making an impact in the quiet pre-dawn air. Tails nodded as he approached the bed, silent as a shadow. Scarfz took in the deep bags underneath the fox’s eyes, his bloodshot gaze, and singed forearms.

“Dude,” he whispered. “You look like shit.”

Tails’ snort echoed like a gunshot in the quiet. But neither Shadow in his bed or Wachowski in the hammock stirred at it.

“Yeah well… you look…”

“Like death?” The hedgehog provided helpfully.

It must have been the wrong thing to say. Tails face fell like a steel door, expression hard and angry.

“Don’t even joke about that.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry.” Scarfz apologized, reaching out for his brother. Sighing, Tails took his hand gently into his own, still sensitive from the burns he had suffered earlier.

Scarfz felt so tired. The crackle of energy in his chest had been flickering so low for what felt like ages now.

It feels like I’ve already died . The thought was a dry, humorous chuckle, and he didn’t dare voice it aloud now. But it wasn’t tinged with fear. After all, Scarfz had faced the prospect of death many a time now.

Facing it alone, however… it was nearly more than he could bear.

“Hey bud,” the words grated in his throat, and if he had any more energy he might hate himself for what he was about to ask. “Will you stay?”

There was so much unsaid between the paltry words. *Will you stay with me, even if this doesn’t work out?*

He hoped Tails could forgive him this cowardice.

“‘Course,” Tails sniffed, a watery smile bravely shining through. “I'm your sidekick, remember?”

Scarfz laughed, though it sounded more like a cough. “Right. Best sidekick in the world, if I remember correctly. Beat them all out in the audition, didn’t you?”

Tails laughed softly, remembering the simpler times, when their biggest worry was only Eggman trying to audition to become Sonic’s sidekick as part of some stupid ruse.

At that moment, his communicator began beeping erratically with an incoming call. The fox glanced at it, annoyed, before shooting Scarfz an apologetic look.

“I’ll be back, okay?”

Nodding, Scarfz released his hand, smiling encouragingly at the fox. “I know, lil bud. I’ll be here.”

Tails hadn't communicated with the group back on Angel Island for a couple hours now, his mind occupied with Scarfz here on the mainland.

Knuckles was rattling off a plan so threadbare and simple it hardly sounded coherent at all. What he was proposing wasn't even a shot in the dark. But Tails knew they were out of options, out of plans.

"Bring him to the emerald," Knuckles had told him, voice crackling oddly through the communicator. The fact tapped at the back of Tails' mind. There shouldn't be interference on the isolated island.

"It's dead," Tails snapped, remembering what they'd told him of the gem before he'd left.

A couple of faces in the living room turned to look at him at the outburst, concerned, but no one could fault him for the losses of his temper. Taking a deep breath, Tails evened his tone out with some effort. "We're not moving him."

"Tails, he doesn't have much time-"

"You think I don't know that?" The vicious snarl was chased by an abrupt biting sob, and Tails bit down on his tongue at the sound, copper flooding his mouth.

He refused to cry.

"Why?" He asked again. "I need you to tell me why. If we're going to… If you're going to *ask* me to do this to him," *sentence him to die,* "I need to know why." *Without the machines, without Shadow's filtered energy, he'd die.*

Knuckles was silent for a moment. The quiet seemed to stretch into eternity, the quiet crackle of interference over the communicator sounding more like a jet roar in the wake of the emptiness.

"Its… it's a feeling."

A disbelieving laugh made its way past the fox's lips, mangled and

wrong. “Seriously?”

“I know! I know it’s stupid, I know I don’t have the best idea but… I’ve been feeling this pull recently. Something is… incomplete? And Sonic is incomplete right now too. Look, I wish I could give you better words about all this but it’s worth a shot, isn’t it?”

Tails swallowed hard, closing his eyes. One thought raced through his head with icy clarity.

Sonic might very well not make it.

But Tails would try *anything* before that time came. He’d meet it head on, clawing until he himself had no breath left.

“Alright. We’ll be there soon.”

Buck made quick work of mobilizing everyone, the hedgehog falling into a role that seemed to fit him like a glove. If he was being honest with himself, Scarfz was a bit envious of his other self’s casual optimism and natural leadership. But he knew those emotions came more from his inability to help, rather than any true bitterness.

Maddie was sent home, an exhausted Shadow brushing off any concern as he chaos controlled her back. Scarfz was quickly loaded onto a machine they had commandeered from Eggman, the fox’s usual machines far too small to safely and quickly transport the weakened hedgehog. Buck, BB, and the two Shadow’s loaded up onto the plane, determined to see this through to the end. Despite no longer being able to give the weakened hedgehog any more of his chaos energy, Wachowski refused to be placed too far from Scarfz, the younger hedgehog following him closely, ears occasionally flicking as if responding to someone calling him, though no one did.

The ride was mostly silent, the space filled by the muted roar of the engines and occasional conversation between Buck and his Shadow. BB lingered near Wachowski, concern in the furrow of his brow as Wachowski sat a few feet from Scarfz, watching vigil.

Scarfz felt exhaustion deep in his soul. The remnants of the energy

Shadow had been able to give him fizzled deep in his chest. Had he the strength he might bemoan the fact that now he owed the angry hedgehog a favor.

The plane landed a bit shakily, Tails calling out a short apology at the jostling movement, the metal groaning in protest. When the hatch door opened, the morning light shining far too bright, they turned to see Knuckles and Amy waiting at the end of the ramp.

Scarfz glanced around, doing his best to sit up to get a proper look at the greeting party.

Knuckles seemed… different, for lack of a better word. Older. He seemed to carry a different sort of gravity around him. But when he shot him that same goofy smile after a beat Scarfz relaxed instantly.

With little pomp, Knuckles carried him, the echidna frowning at Scarfz.

“You, uh, lost weight?”

Gut twisting for a moment, Scarfz smiled, something like a scoff leaving his mouth. “Have I? Must be that green cleanse I was on.”

No one laughed, Knuckles’ smile growing a bit more strained. Without another word, he lead them through the shrine and up to the temple.

Scarfz tried to avoid thinking about how much this felt like his funeral.

Attending my own funeral, classy .

There was hardly any pretense now. Staying awake on its own felt like a monumental task. Knuckles thankfully said little as he carried him, the echidna uncharacteristically silent. Scarfz could tell something had… changed, for lack of a better word. Knux was still the same, but there was a firmer set to his shoulder, a presence he lacked before. It reminded him a little of the shorter red echidna.

He might have laughed at the sight that greeted them once they reached the top of the shrine. Everyone was there, lining the path to an altar. As it was, it was a little too odd as the group parted down the middle to allow Knuckles and his charge through.

Scarfz frowned at his friend’s grave expression. “Y’look so serious.” The joke was ruined by the pathetic rasp of his throat, lips moving

sluggishly.

Knuckles looked at him for a moment, as if weighing his answer. “It’s... the serious.”

Gods, it was almost just as lame. But Scarfz was grateful for the attempt, pathetic as it was on both their parts.

Beside Knuckles was Buck’s Shadow, offering his other self the occasional support. The taller Shadow had snarled and snapped at anyone’s offer of help, until Buck’s Shadow had quietly threatened to knock him out and princess-carry him if he didn’t accept.

The sight was… odd, to say the least. But without enough energy to replenish himself, his own Shadow had already begun to suffer the same side effects Scarfz had. Less accelerated, but steady nonetheless. Kickstarted energy consumption processes. Starving body. The whole shebang.

Scarfz exhaled, letting the weight on his eyelids win for the moment.

Gods.

He was so tired. It felt like he’d been fighting against an inescapable tide for weeks. Maybe. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to give in, to be dragged under.

Not yet…

The whisper ran through his mind, electrifying and deep. A shiver scattered through his body and Scarfz forced his eyes to open.

Right.

There were still people who were rooting for him. Tails, Wachowski, Amy, Buck, Knuckles, BB…. And Scarfz hated to disappoint.

Knuckles laid him gently on the stone and Scarfz had to blink at what was suddenly in front of him. Vaguely, he heard Shadow settling on the ground beside him, breath coming in harsh bursts.

A gem.

A *huge* gem.

It was beautiful… in a solemn way. It’s gray tinge reminded him of a tombstone.

It's dying. He wasn't sure how he knew this, but he did. It must have been such a beautiful gem too, before whatever had happened to it.

"Will you pray with me?" Knuckles voice rang out, the taller echidna sounding uncertain as he turned to his counterpart and Tikal.

Tikal nodded firmly, a firm set to her jaw as she took a spot to the right of Knuckles, the resistance leader taking a spot to the left of his counterpart.

"Of course," the shorter echidna murmured, settling into a cross legged position. "Lead the prayer. We'll follow. Just like I showed you."

Scarfz tuned them out as they began their prayer, the words soothing and repetitive. The gem called to him, as if eager to steal his attention away.

It would soon be dead. The blue hedgehog never imagined he'd have anything in common with a massive green gem in the middle of nowhere, but hey even the fates seemed to have crazy twists ready for him.

He was still hanging on, but it was so hard. It lingered at the edge of his vision, the endless darkness encroaching. He was so tired.

Breathe in.

Extending one hand weakly, Scarfz wondered what the gem might feel like. Cold? Warm? But his gloves were too thick, hands too clammy to sense much through the fabric. Grunting in frustration Scarfz tugged at the edges.

Shadow must have noticed, glancing between Scarfz and the praying echidnas before making a choice. In two deft movements Scarfz' gloves were off, dropped in the space beside his head.

The blue hedgehog could hardly spend the energy it took to move, let alone thank the other hedgehog. He reached out again, feeling like he was moving through quicksand.

The world ground to a halt erratically, but definitively. Still, Scarfz reached out, feeling a missing piece settle deep, deep within his self, the spot resonating with the same timbre as the whisper from before. Harmonizing.

The pads of his fingers cradled the gem.

Breathe out.

The world stopped.

He understood now. Palm pressed achingly against the surface of the gem, he could feel the answer. The void the planet sat in was unnatural, deadbrush ready to ignite at the slightest spark. The *right* spark. The emerald was the flint and he was the last remaining ember.

Finally, the whisper breathed in his mind, relief and eagerness wrapped into a single word.

All around him, the world burst to life.

He gasped, the shock of energy was powerful and *right.* It belonged here, it was from here. His entire soul soaked it up like scorched land in a rainfall. But before he could celebrate, eyes squinting against the growing glow of the emerald, a ripple at its center caught his eye.

The spot shifted, like water boiling beneath the emerald's growing radiance. Shielding his eyes, Scarf tried to make out the shape within brilliant emerald green.

"Hey guys! I think it's okay! I think it's healing its-" But before he could finish, a hand wrapped around his arm.

Formless and clawed, it came from *within* the emerald.

Before anyone could move, Scarfz was pulled in.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank y'all for the patience, the comments, they really keep me going! I am incapable of short chapters, apparently. The final chapter is primarily written out as this was (again) meant to be one.
>
> Huge shout out to Thark, for beta-ing and letting me yell about certain portions and inspiring scenes between Buck and Wachowski. As always, Ren and Fourth are the masterminds behind the scenes.

Breath of Life

Chapter Summary

> They've brought life back to the planet, but awakened something in the process.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scarfz couldn't remember a time in his life when breathing had felt so effortless. When existing wasn't tinged by the flicker of tiredness at the back of his mind. It was easy to live with it and never notice, but now?

Now he truly felt *alive.*

The light around him was bright and endless, but it didn't burn. The glow was comforting. It wrapped around him like a blanket, soothing the aches and chasing away thoughts. It moved with a purpose, with intent, a deep timbre crooning as if it recognized him.

The melody tilted upwards in a question. There were no words, but Scarfz could understand the intent in a manner deeper than language. An offer. An agreement.

A contract.

The alternative was clear. His body was all but a husk now. There was only one choice he could make.

Lips heavy with the golden dew, he murmured his assent, falling deeper into the blazing light.

The flash of light from the emerald was blinding.

It was as if a small sun had materialized in the space Scarfz and the Emerald had been occupying.

Wachowski shielded his eyes with his hands, the light blinding even as he curled away from it. The brilliance threatened to pierce his very body. A ringing timbre accompanied it, as if the energy and the world were singing together in harmony, the melody now complete.

When the light finally subsided, Wachowski pulled his hands from his eyes, blinking away the spots of color in his vision.

The sight that came to materialized before him was surreal.

The Master Emerald was shining with an otherworldly brilliance, the gem gently turning in its pedestal as it glimmered in the late morning light. It's own shine easily outpacing whatever could be offered by the sun's rays. But Scarfz was nowhere to be seen.

Scrabbling to his feet, Wachowski zipped around the emerald, only finding Shadow strewn on the ground. A quick check over the black hedgehog told him he was only passed out.

Wachowski lapped around the shrine once more, Buck and BB joining in his search and calling out for their friend. The last anyone had seen before the light had grown too bright had been Scarfz kneeling before the emerald, peering into it.

"Scarfz? Scarfz!" Wachowski circled back to the group more than a little desperate now. Most of them seemed to still be blinking away the blinding effects of the flash of light.

"What happened?" Tails asked, raising his goggles back into place, looking less disoriented than the rest. Beside him, Knuckles helped Amy to her feet, the pink hedgehog covering her eyes with trembling hands as the tall echidna led her by the elbow to sit down.

"I'm not sure." Buck's eyes were already scanning the area, ready for anything. Suddenly, laughter rang out over the shrine top, the sound bright and elated.

Hovering twenty feet above the Master Emerald was none other than Scarfz himself, a radiant grin lighting up his face. Wachowski could hardly recognize him.

"I can't believe it," Buck muttered, his own smile growing slowly as he took in the golden glow of the floating hedgehog.

Whooping loudly, Scarfz leaned forward into an effortless glide, circling the shrine once, even his plain brown bandanna transformed

into a billowing garment that glowed a bright, otherworldly blue.

Buck finally looked at Wachowski, “It’s Super Sonic! He’s okay! *He’s okay!*” The relief written on his face was so plain and clear that Wachowski couldn’t help but smile back at him. Laughter rang out, joining in with the gleeful sounds above.

Circling the shrine once more, Scarfz finally settled on the space he had occupied. The spot of stone where he’d been dying only moments before. Around the area his feet hovered, the wildlife bloomed, angling and pushing towards him as if he were the sun itself.

“How?” Wachowski gaped, resisting the urge to embrace the glowing hedgehog. Even with his inexperience, he could feel the waves of chaos energy rolling off of the other, powerful and right. He closed his eyes, arms opening to welcome the warmth that rolled off of Scarfz.

This was it! This was right.

“I’ve no idea!” Scarfz laughed. And it was so *ridiculous* that they joined in too.

Suddenly, Scarfz was swarmed by his friends, a clamoring embrace that he tried to return as best he could. Even Buck couldn’t keep the emotion from his face too far, eyes nearly as watery as Tails, who looked a second away from full on blubbering.

After a moment, they stepped back, Tails already pacing and gesticulating wildly, shooting off theories a mile a minute about how this was possible. Smiling fondly, Scarfz settled for watching, noticing Buck peering at him out of the corner of his eye.

The golden hedgehog smirked, twirling an edge of his bandanna around a finger. “I’m sure Amy has a bottle of hair dye if you’re keen on copying my look.”

Buck smirked, leaning back almost proudly. “Please, I’ve gone super enough to know I look *way* better but…” green eyes darted towards the billowing garment. “I don’t get an accessory,” he added in a mutter.

Scarfz blinked. Then burst out in a full-bellied laugh.

“That’s what you’re jealous about?” He wheezed. And when BB began rapid signing as well, hands too fast to follow, Buck let out a guffaw as well, grabbing the smaller hedgehog's hands before Wachowski caught

on to the blatantly rude signs. The joy was contagious and so easy to jump in on. Intoxicating.

Wrapped up in the blanket of their relief, no one noticed the hum that began to emanate from the Master Emerald. Softly at first, it became a growling crescendo.

The air filled with the strangest of sounds. A deep hum.

Laughter bubbling down, the group turned to the source of disturbance. An echoing, distorted sound groaned through the air, shifting in pitches and dissonance, sounding like a fragmented tape.

Fragmented.

“Wait,” Wachowski stepped forward. He’d heard that voice before. Echoing in his mind as a whisper.

Light, golden and deep, poured out of the emerald, seeping out and pooling at it’s base. It shifted in place, flowing like water, creeping up into empty air. The strange light moved like liquid flame, fluid and hungry. It froze for a moment, movements eerily akin to a predator tasting the air.

Knuckles stiffened beside Buck, the resistance leader able to feel the strange taste of foreign chaos bleed into the air, heady and overpowering. He stifled a shudder, looking towards his taller self and Tikal. They seemed as if they’d been struck, no doubt able to sense what he could much more clearly.

“Is that…” The energy pulsed again, as if searching for something, and he could barely *speak* .

Tikal nodded, her own actions stiff.

“It’s him. *Chaos.”*

Suddenly, in a strike too quick for anyone to swallow, the fiery, languid form shot out in a beam of pure power.

Striking Scarfz straight in his chest. Instantly, his friends reared back, Buck throwing a protective arm across Wachowski and BB.

Grunting from the impact Scarfz floating wobbled only a bit. The golden hedgehog looked at them confused, red eyes wide.

“What the-” But the words choked off in his throat as his body seemed to convulse.

Scarfz’ cry was quickly cut off with a garbled choke, his figure doubling over. His body shuddered as a change took hold; quills flowed out, growing longer and ending in trails of flame. His hands trembled and curved over his ears as if to protect himself, the tips of his fingers curling into vicious claws.

Scarfz hunched over, his groan shifting in tandem to the dissonant sound, the pure golden sheen of the super form somehow acquiring another ethereal glow.

Finally, sucking in one last deep gasp, he stilled. The roiling energy that had thrashed around his body was gone now. Slotted into place.

No one dared breathe.

Scarfz hung still in mid air, still curled up as if hiding from the onslaught.

Far away, a bird sang.

Wachowski stepped forward first. The bubble of space around their friend had grown as he’d begun to react to the beam of energy, but Buck’s words from before still rang in his ears.

You’re gonna learn how to rely on friends and your own instincts. And right now, his instincts were screaming at him to help, to make sure the hedgehog was okay.

“Scarfz?”

No response.

Then, a single ear twitched. They all breathed a collective sigh of relief as he began to uncurl from his position.

Red eyes snapped open, but where there were irises before, there was now only endless red swirling.

Glittering gold and burning red, the same colors they had seen in the tapestries within the ancient library and in the stones throughout the city.

The figure moved, stretching out its limbs, craning its neck to get a look at its new body.

Buck narrowed his eyes. The figure moved jerkily, as if unused to movement.

Whatever this was, it wasn't Scarfz. Beside him BB tensed, looking at the new, distorted form of their friend with nothing short of horror.

Finally, the figure opened its maw, revealing terrifyingly pointed teeth. It raised a hand to its cheek as if to examine it.

"Well," The voice that spoke was definitely *not* Scarfz. Far too low and deep. "Being shattered wasn't quite *nearly* as pleasant as I imagined." It hummed, seemingly pleased with the inspection so far. It turned to look straight at Wachowski, mouth curving into a smile. "So you managed to bring him to me after all, little one. Well done. I haven't had a proper avatar in so long, and this one is just *lovely*. "

Wachowski paled. Horror dawned in his mind as he recognized the voice, the deep timbre echoing in his mind. When he'd electrocuted Scarfz, after he'd saved him, when he'd heard the whispers to return…

He'd helped deliver Scarfz here.

Oh god.

What had they done?

Being fragmented for so long was more than a little disorienting. In truth, the god had slept for longer periods of time, but fragmenting a mind was far more uncomfortable. A kind of living death.

He hadn't taken an avatar in five hundred years, but he *had* felt their sparks flicker into existence. Blue hedgehogs, chosen by the pools themselves, destined to become his tether to the physical realm. But

their flames hardly lasted more than in this world before sputtering out.

He hoped they had at least met a peaceful death. As unlikely as that was.

But, *this* one was special. He had survived, and even at death's door, he had continued to burn, holding out for the vaguest of hopes.

Holding out for *him* .

Chaos did not take his duties lightly. The contract had been reinstated the moment this little blue one had reached out his Emerald, cementing his new status. When he had pulled him in, made his offer like he had with the first one long ago, the little one accepted.

But now, occupying this new body, he truly realized how unused this body was to chaos energy. As if it had never had it. As a result, the sheer amount his self possessed threatened to burn through this body. Literally. He frowned, feeling around for the second one.

There should be two…

There had always been two. One to be the host and the other to redirect excess energy in situations like this. There was only one other energy signature that resonated with his host's, coming from the black and red hedgehog near his emerald.

Before the skin of his host could begin to simmer beneath the full brunt of his presence, he made a choice, linking the contract.

The relief was immediate. The black hedgehog's eyes fluttered open, his own form flickering gold for a brief moment from the diverted energy.

With the crisis averted, he sighed and realized that the little mortals had been clamoring for his attention.

"I *said* give us our friend back!." The golden figure took in the blue fur of the one who had yelled out to him, confused for a moment. Other avatars? That wasn't possible…There could only be one at a time...

He pondered this question for a beat longer until the fragrance of foreign chaos energy finally reached him.

Ah, alternate versions then. Odd, but understandable.

A quick search through his host's memories gave him the information he needed.

"Buck, is it?" The blue hedgehog seemed shocked, recovering impressively nonetheless. The god smiled, noting that it did the opposite of put any of them at ease. "Rest assured, your friend is here."

"And who the hell are you?" The dark hedgehog near his emerald was looking at him oddly, stretching out his newly healed limbs almost warily. No doubt he could feel the change, sudden as it had been. That species had always had a unique chaos affinity. But this one… he wasn't wholly of them, was he?

Grinning, the golden figure spoke his Name. It was distorted to most and could only take shape to those who had a contract or connection to him.

Shadow- his host's memories offered this name easily- winced as some of the others covered their ears entirely to block out the sound. His ears twitched as the whisper of a name took place amidst the roiling sound.

"Fleet…. Fleetway? What the hell kind of name is that?" The god narrowed his eyes. So it had worked after all.

Fleetway smiled knowingly before chuckling. "Close enough."

An echidna, the shortest of the trio, stepped forward. "Are you Chaos?" He demanded. And Fleetway saw the fire he so admired about their race in this one. Powerful and loyal.

"In a way." He answered cryptically, enjoying the terse expressions before continuing. "I am the God of Chaos. Master of Creation. Source of the Light. Father of something or the other." A hand waved airily in the air. "You get the picture." He floated a bit higher, lounging in the air.

"Chaos is the closest translation to my name in this tongue, I have a lot different names in each language. Chaos to the echidnas, Inti to your people," he glanced at the dark hedgehog, a smile curving on his lips. "Each name is a gift, so you may call me what you wish."

"Inti, Fleetway, Chaos." He shot them a swirling glance, wicked grin ever present. *"Dad."*

At their blustering and outraged outcry Fleetway burst into laughter. They always took things so seriously!

The mortals still stared at him warily, but seemed less poised to attack him now. He really hoped they wouldn't. What a pain that would be. Mending this body was taking longer than he'd like, the damage being oddly extensive.

"Are you going to let Scarfz go then?" The one called Buck asked again, hands curling into determined fists.

Fleetway cocked his head, smile slipping in confusion. "Let him go? I'm holding no one prisoner, little one, especially not my avatar. The Ethereal." The god used the old word for the position. It felt warm and bitter on his tongue. He tried for another smile, but again it seemed like it did anything but put them at ease.

Was it the teeth? He liked his teeth.

The god sighed then, grin dropping by a couple of degrees."I believe an apology is in order." He murmured.

Even before his fragmenting, he had seldom appeared before any mortals. There hadn't been any need. "My mortal skills are rusty after having my consciousness split apart." He looked directly at the littlest one, the one who had heard his call first. Wachowski, the memories told him. The kid had good instincts. Almost a natural disposition towards There was a warm bubbling of affection in his host's chest at the sight of the boy.

"I swear on the balance I'm not keeping him prisoner." He insisted. Normally, he wouldn't bother with trying to win over other mortals, but his host was attached to them. Strongly so. And he had always had a soft spot for his avatars. "Mortals have delicate systems and the super form only healed his superficial wounds. The remnants of sickness still linger in his body. I'm healing that and any past damage."

Atrophied muscles strengthened even as he spoke. The muscles had not reached their full development, but with some training and the reinstated ambient chaos that could be remedied in time. Briefly, the god wondered how his host had been able to survive at all in such a hostile environment.

Buck narrowed his eyes, but slowly relaxed his fighting stance. "You said avatar. Does that mean you're keeping his body?"

Fleetway's eyes widened before he burst into booming laughter, his open maw revealing endless rows of razor sharp teeth. They stared slack jawed at the guffawing golden figure, his booming laughter carrying out into the open air.

"*No!* " he wheezed. Settling into a chuckle, Chaos examined his claws. "I care very much for all life, especially that of my avatars." He corrected himself after a beat. "The contract is more in their favor than in mine, to be truthful." Lacing his fingers together Fleetway settled his chin on his hands, examining them amusedly "I get a physical tether to this plane and they are able to access my knowledge and, under very specific circumstances, my power."

"Contract?"

"The one that was reinstated, of course." A claw clinked against the perfect surface of the Emerald. "Opening a physical tether to the world, igniting chaos energy on this planet once more, completing the healing cycle that was begun by my Xaoc so many years ago."

He zeroed in his manic gaze towards the echidnas. "Though your race likely knew them by a different name."

"The star speakers!" Tikal gasped, stepping towards the golden figure, something like awe in her eyes.

Fleetway sighed, looking towards her fondly. "Ah, yes. They really did love the name the echidnas gave them. Adds an air of mystery, don't you think?"

"I can't believe the stories were true!" She breathed, looking back towards Knuckles excitedly. Both echidnas seemed nothing short of baffled by the strange new turn of events, their fists uncurling if only slightly.

"Your Chaos… looks like Sonic?" The shorter echidna looked towards the other two. Fleetway huffed but bit back his initial retort.

"I took on this form after I made the first contract. The Xaoc seemed less put off by this form than my other ones, though judging by your reactions I believe they masked their true thoughts in order to pacify me." He muttered pensively into his glove. The thought stung a bit. He had believed this form to be less off putting than his initial attempt of an amorphous, liquid figure with jeweled eyes. They certainly wouldn't have liked his true form.

Fiery spirals zeroed in on the taller of the red echidna's, an intrigued gleam in those strange eyes. The memories were still settling into place. He remembered the war, flashes of his shattering, another beloved blue hedgehog... but some of the details still eluded him.

"So anyone could have become your avatar?" Buck cut through the god's thoughts, face set in a dubious frown. "Touch the emerald and that's it?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But only rare exceptions can handle the contract without going mad or…" he tapped on one sharp tooth, the distinctive scent of scorched flesh surfacing briefly. "Burning out."

"'Rare exceptions.'" An echidna frowned. "I assume that means our friend."

Fleetway's gaze snapped to the red echidna, taking in the tall, broad form. He smiled, slow and gleeful. "He is chaos touched, yes."

"Chaos touched?" The echidna echoed.

"Yes,you know the signs I'm sure, guardian. Blue fur, one touched by chaos itself. And only Xaoc's have been chosen, so far. Their race always had a special affinity to chaos, much like yours does."

"I do? We do?" Knuckles echoed, suddenly looking uncertain. Exchanging a glance with Tikal proved fruitless, the girl looking as lost as he was, and the resistance leader only shrugged.

"I have a connection with my own Master Emerald, but up until a day ago we didn't even know your dimension *had* chaos emeralds, much less a Master Emerald." The shorter echidna crossed his arms, staring at the strange thing that called itself Chaos, among other things.

"Oh, of course there's chaos emeralds." Fleetway waved a hand impatiently. "They were all placed in different shrines, much like the Master Emerald was placed here for safekeeping, it-" He cut off suddenly, the cracks in weathered stone standing out to him for the first time since he had emerged.

The god's expression grew unnaturally still as he took in the extent of the damage. The city overtaken by jungle and time.

"Oh… I suppose you wouldn't know?" A beat of silence before he turned to look at the echidna's. His borrowed face was perfectly still, but the flame surrounding his quills began to flicker erratically. "How

much of your tribe is left?"

The echidnas exchanged a glance, Tikal stepping forward after a beat. "We think it's just us two left." She said solemnly, gesturing for the Knuckles beside her.

Fleetway laughed haltingly, looking at the two. He glanced around, a little frantic, as if expecting more echidnas to emerge from the fallen stone. "No that's. That's not right. That can't be right. More must have survived there's no way-"

He froze suddenly, a pained look crossing his features. Swirling red eyes looked down at the hands of his host before looking at Shadow once more. "What about… my Xaoc? How many are left? How many… survived?"

Amy looked at the echidna's then, and Fleetway may have had trouble interacting with mortals, but he could read her expression well enough.

Slowly, the god bowed his head. Atop his emerald, he could almost pretend nothing had changed. That time hadn't shifted so violently without him. That he hadn't failed them all entirely. Atop his emerald, he could nearly pretend that the city and his Xaoc were still alive.

Old Tucker moved past Buck, Amy and finally Knuckles, regret and guilt etched in every line on his face. "None, my lord, except for Sonic it seems."

Fleetway chose that moment to look at Shadow, the black hedgehog meeting his gaze boldly. The god closed his eyes against the truth. There had been *so many* before. How long had it been? Was it really only these two left?

The pink one looked like one of his Xaoc… but she lacked their unique chaos capabilities. A descendant, perhaps.

Did they think I abandoned them?

A shuddering exhale left his host's body, the systems responding to his grief as if he were mortal itself. Centering his thoughts, the god shelved the tidal waves that threatened to overtake them. They would have to be dealt with later.

He had an avatar to heal and guide now. And a sentinel as well, it appeared.

Fleetway turned to thank the turtle for his truth, but before he could speak his eyes caught on the medallion around the wrinkled throat. Words turned to ash in his mouth, burning and blistering.

Those geometric shapes had been burned into his mind long ago. The symbol of the ancients.

Fleetway took another deep, shuddering breath, mania swirling in his mind. The last one's scream. The pain as the contract was abruptly severed. The screaming of the emerald as it was fragmented with his consciousness locked away inside-

"Turtle." The word hissed through jagged teeth. Flashes of the burning city filled his mind, machines powered with the crystal abominations, the twisted gems screaming with the souls trapped within.

Chaos crystals.

"Why do you wear that symbol?"

The turtle resembled more a fish then, mouth gaping as he fumbled for the chain around his neck.

With a wave of his hand, Fleetway parted the group from the turtle. A couple of them stumbled, but all of his focus was on the elderly mortal before him. Fleetway floated down from his emerald, body blazing bright with fury as he approached.

"Are you the last ancient, turtle?" He asked in a deep, deceitful croon. "Your people annihilated the echidnas, you know. And the Xaoc, the hedgehogs who came here to *heal* the planet your people were killing. You know all of this, don't you?" The smile returned as Tucker bobbed his head in assent.

Opening a palm, energy pulsed in the air, before settling into a chaos spear. The weapon was pure and bright, the energy perfectly molded and shaped into a proper spear. "Good!" Fleetway praised him, seemingly pleased. But the very air trembled as he moved, super charged. ""Then why don't we *balance the scales a bit."*

The force of the chaos as Fleetway literally waved them away hit Buck in the chest like a punch. He looked desperately at his Shadow, noticing the other seemed similarly affected. Wachowski was next to BB, helping the smaller one to his feet.

Chaos, is this what Scarfz was feeling?

Brushing the thoughts from his mind, Buck focused on the scene before him. Before seeing Old Tucker Fleetway had seemed calm, reasonable. The golden form was still smiling as he spoke to the turtle, but every experience in the hero's memory told him the turtle was in *danger* .

With hardly a second thought, Buck stepped in front of Old Tucker

"Wait! Stop!" Fleetway jerked back from him, halting his approach towards Old Tucker. Buck wasn't exactly filled in on what was going on, but he could read murderous intent well enough.

"This is not your world, child." Fleetway waved his hand once more, pushing Buck back with another forceful wave of chaos. "Do not meddle in affairs you don't know."

A barrier was thrown up, walls glowing a burnished, translucent gold. Buck pushed against it before pulling back with a hiss of pain. The surface *burned* like hot metal.

"NO. PLEASE." Tikal pushed against the barrier, jerking back with a cry as it burned her as well. "Please no, no, don't do this, you aren't-you *can't!"*

Old Tucker turned to look at her, a sad smile crossing his face. Buck tried to scramble to his feet but was finding it hard to get them to move like he wanted. The sheer amount of the strange chaos felt intoxicating. Behind him, Shadow hauled him upright, supporting him as he gasped for breath.

"It's alright, Tikal." The turtle smiled. "I never thought this day might come, but if this is how I atone for my sins, then I am at peace." He swallowed hard. "It would be an honor to die at the hands of such magnificent chaos.

For a brief moment, the golden figure seemed conflicted, brow furrowing. But it left as quickly as it came.

"No." The word tremored with different timbre now, the god's snarl

growing in volume. “By the time I finish with you, peace will be the last thing you know.”

Rage vibrated in every ounce of his being. The memories were returning. The draining of the world. His chosen avatar and Sentinel arriving at this planet… How long ago had it been?

And the Ancients. Oh, many of them had been kind. Welcoming. Worried about the slow death their planet and people might face at such a rapid drainage. But they had also looked away as members of their own civilization had begun to tamper with things they never should have touched.

Chaos was life. That was a fundamental truth of the universe. When one died, their chaos, their essence and soul, returned to the pools. To steal the entirety of a living being’s chaos, cram it within a crystal and use it as a glorified *battery*-

It was sickening.

It was true death.

The turtle stopped, falling clumsily to his knees before Fleetway. Raising a cool brow, the god watched him fumble for a moment with his pack, content to let him grovel.

It didn’t take long for the turtle to bring out what he searched for. In his hands was a golden, spiked crystal, shaped like a burst of sunlight. The scent of the chaos energy within it hit him like a blast. He recognized that chaos.

It wasn’t possible.

And now, Fleetway could remember it like it was yesterday. The avatar who had sealed the god away and shattered the gem in a final effort to protect his power. The Sentinel who had died protecting his friend and charge. Or so he had thought.

“The sun crystal,” Old Tucker explained, settling the crystal in it’s leather wrapping before the god. “I retrieved it in an abandoned

research facility. I don't know who he was before… before what they did to him. But they called it the sun crysta and, they used it to power the sentinel machines."

Fleetway sucked in a breath. Horrified. They had named their murderous machines after his position and used his energy...

For the first time since time could remember, the god was speechless. Energy seeped out of his avatar's body, lashing and frantic like whip cracks of light.

Old Tucker was already offering himself as a sacrifice. Fleetway hadn't taken a sacrifice in *eons* but oh he wanted to now. He wanted to rip and tear this being apart until nothing remained of his essence. Give him the abhorrent, incomplete death his race had given to so many innocent beings centuries ago. He needed to burn it away. It needed to be pure once more.

Raising a hand, he shut out the screams that rose around him. No one would be able to interfere.

Swirling into a whirlpool of crackling golden light, a chaos spear burned brighter. In a jagged movement, the tip of the crackling blade arced towards the turtle.

"PLEASE. NO."

The crackling energy stopped. Only a hair's breadth away from the orange echidna, Tikal.

He couldn't disrupt the balance with her death.

Frustration bubbled up in his host's throat.

"Move." He ordered. But as he raised a hand to wave her away, a weak shield crackled to like in her hands.

It was faint. Paltry. No doubt she'd used most of her strength to push past his barrier. Her manipulation of chaos was laughable but it was there.

"Inti, Chaos, please don't!" She grunted with effort as the shield puttered out for a brief moment. "He saved me, he raised me. He's all I have left please don't-"

"He *slaughtered* your people!" His choked back his words before they

could pitch to a scream. Couldn't she see? He was a blight. An aberration. "He slaughtered mine, all of my-"

The sun crystal glinted at his feet and the words died in the god's throat. He looked at the girl, feeling more lost than any celestial being had a right to be. "Why are you protecting him?" He asked her. The desperation was welling up within him. He could feel how time had moved. *How long it had been* . And it was true. As the chaos slowly seeped back into the world he could feel its barren emptiness.

Tikal seemed to realize she had a chance. Quelling her panic she grasped at the words that threatened to scatter from her mind.

"My father. He taught me everything. He made sure I knew *everything.* Not just the good. But the bad. Told me what they did, told me about *you."* She swallowed hard. "The things we knew, at the very least. And everything he told me about you was magnificent." Tears shone in her eyes as she pleaded. "Chaos breathes life, Order brings death.

"Please. I know what they did was horrible, but *please.* " She must have known her little shield would have stood no chance. And he didn't get it. He didn't understand.

Where was the echidna's justice? The Xaoc's? Where was *his* justice?

It had been too long. The last survivors knew nothing of what had been suffered. They had moved on. Ancient crimes would be forgotten and only he would remember.

Fleetway could understand that the old turtle, in his own way, had lived to mend the actions of his race. But it wasn't enough. It could never be.

A scream ripped from his throat, his grief pouring out in the only way he could let it now. The chaos spear lanced forward, the sheer energy unmatched by anything they'd ever seen.

But before it could touch anything it dissipated, energy crackling out in an empty static.

Fleetway stared at the crystal, focusing on the unfamiliar shape that housed an all too familiar soul. If he looked at the turtle he was likely to kill him on the spot regardless of any begging.

Breathe in.

They had taught him a technique long ago to ‘control anger.’ He’d always thought it’d been so silly. He didn’t need to breathe.

And yet.

Breathe out.

Leaning forward, Fleetway lowered his mouth to the turtle so he could better hear. "You live today," he whispered, voice echoing with the rage and sorrow of five hundred years, "only to give back what was stolen. That will be your only purpose, until you return to the pools."

Kneeling, Fleetway picked up the golden crystal from where it lay on its leather wrapping, turning to his now silent audience.

The barrier fell with a thought, the heat from its presence spreading back out into the air. Approaching the group, he gave the gem to the last Xaoc left besides his host. Shadow.

“Treat him gently.” Fleetway murmured, wrapping the old leather around the gem. He stared directly towards the black hedgehog, sending his intent across the newly forged connection. “Do not use this energy. He’s suffered enough.”

Then, taking a step back, he turned towards his Emerald.

And let go.

It was a songbird that lulled Scarfz out of what was, hands down, the best rest of his life. Sunlight filtered through his closed eyes and the blue hedgehog scrunched his face, turning away from the brightness. Scarfz woke up slowly, stretching languidly. Even the hard stone beneath him felt amazing.

Actually.

He felt amazing. He had never felt this good before!

Settling onto his side, Scarfz wanted to slip back into the welcome respite of his dreams, before someone was screaming in his ear.

Needless to say, he screamed back.

Waking up to find your friends both excited and afraid to see you was one of the more unique ways to come to.

Having no consideration for the groggy hedgehog, Knuckles had hauled him to his feet into a bone crushing hug that Scarfz had tried to tap out of after the first five seconds.

After Buck and the rest had filled him in on what had happened, Scarf hadn't been exactly sure how to take the information that he was now the physical tether of the god of chaos. Honestly, had it not been for the strange dream he'd had after being pulled into the emerald, he might have dismissed it all as a collective hallucination.

"Well, I guess there's worse things?" He'd shrugged. But on seeing Tikal and her father crying softly in the center of the shrine, he wasn't sure how true that was.

Without warning, Buck grasped him in a fierce hug, Wachowski hopping in on it as well, followed by BB. Closing his eyes, Scarf let their clamor wash over him again.

"Man, a little sickness really brings out the water works doesn't it?" He laughed, but there was a happy glistening in his eyes that betrayed his emotions.

BB signed quickly, gesturing somewhat threateningly towards the Emerald. Knuckles stepped in to translate, the resistance leader clapping Scarfz merrily on his arm.

"He's asking if you're good now? No more tricks? Chaos, uh-Fleetway, won't try and pull a fast one on us?"

Warily, Scarfz looked at the Master Emerald. It turned peacefully within its altar, glittering serene

He hadn't *sensed* any deceit or malice from the golden form. But from what he'd been told, the god had given them all quite the scare.

"I don't think so. There wasn't much he actually *said* to me," Scarfz shrugged, suddenly aware of the eyes on him "But he just seemed happy at the time, I don't know. And before he left he didn't really say anything else. That gem really..." He frowned as he remembered the lingering sensation. He couldn't remember what had happened, but he could feel brief flashes of emotions, like remembering a dream as it slips away. " That gem really had an effect on him."

A tug at his side caught his attention. Wachowski was all but brimming with withheld energy.

“You’re okay, right?!” He blurted out, blinking away the shine in his eyes. “Things got pretty intense but you’re here, you’re *here*- ”

Scarfz eyes widened and he immediately knelt to meet the kid’s eyes. “Hey! Hey yeah I’m here, I’m right here bud look-” He took Wachowski’s hand, squeezing it tightly. Testing his new reserves now, Scarfz braved sending out a thin tendril of energy towards the young hog, like Wachowski had done the past couple of days.

“Feel that? That’s all mine, I’m good now. I’m here.”

And that was almost too much for Wachowski. The past couple of days had been nothing short of *hell* for him but after it all, Scarfz was there. Whole, smiling, and there. Wachowski wrapped his arms around Scarfz’ neck, squeezing tight. This was what mattered.

After a brief moment of shock, Scarfz hugged the kid back. And if he felt Wachowski’s shoulders shake, he didn’t say a word.

“Okay okay, *my turn!* ” Tails had been more than sufficiently patient. Both Wachowski *and* BB had been taking turns on Scarfz’s shoulders, the taller hedgehog clearly taking advantage of his newly healed body.

“Tails I think you’re a bit too big to fit on my sho- *oof*” And apparently Tails didn’t care he was no longer kit-sized.

“Come on, where’s your sense of challenge! I bet Buck carries his Tails *all* the time.”

“Well actually Tails is at that age where-”

“No no.” Tails looked down from his perch, leveling the other blue hedgehog with a stare. “No Buck.”

Scarfz laughed brightly. They were getting ready to depart, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was still missing.

“Hey guys, where’s Shadow?”

At the name, Buck's Shadow raised his head, giving him an unimpressed look. "Near the Emerald, still. He hasn't moved since you returned."

Scarfz patted Tails' leg on his shoulder. "Think you can get everyone on board? I'll be back. Wanna check in on Old Tuck and Tikal." *And Shadow* . Something had happened and he figured the moody hedgehog could fill him in on the blanks.

Tails hopped off with little grace, giving out orders before he even touched the ground. "Amy, can you go get U.T.? Yeah you thought I forgot huh- oh wait. BB."

The round hedgehog perked up while Amy scowled behind Tails. "Can you go with Amy? I don't trust U.T. to come back safely if she goes alone."

Grinning wickedly, BB nodded, skipping off to accompany the sullen pink hedgehog back down to the library.

The voices faded as Scarfz jogged back up towards the topmost part of the shrine. Tikal and Old Tucker were no longer crouched in the center, but had moved to a shady corner, where the remains of a pillar offered respite from the sun.

"Hey! Uh, what's up?" Scarfz realized how lame that was as he took in their stricken expressions. Tikal recovered first, brushing her eyes clear quickly.

"I'm glad to see you're okay," she smiled.

"Thanks." Scarfz didn't really know Tikal, but from what he'd gathered, she'd been pretty important on other worlds. "Um, listen. About what happened-"

But a brown tipped hand was already held up, cutting his words off.

"We know that wasn't you and-" Tikal bit her lip, before sighing, "I do get it. He remembered everything and… I'm just glad my father is okay. Thank you, though." She brightened considerably as she remembered something.

"Oh! Though I could use your help with something."

Scarfz perked up at that, while Tucker sighed.

“Sure! I can try.”

“Well my father seems to think it a *grand* idea to search for any elusive remaining echidnas on his own-”

“Tikal, I really don’t think-”

“On his *own* ,” Tikal all but hissed, easily moving past the turtle’s interruption. “I was wondering if you’d help me convince him to take some time to rest and research before setting off without a plan.”

Scarf frowned, hand on his chin. “Well, you’re absolutely welcome with us, and U.T. still has the scans. I’m sure Knuckles would be happy to help. Maybe you could at least find a direction?”

Tikal clapped her hands together, looking like the cat who caught the canary. “Brilliant! It’s decided then.”

Agreeing that they would at least accompany them to the mainland, Scarfz watched the pair head towards the shrine steps. Tucker had tried to voice his complaints as Tikal had ushered them towards the ship, but her subtle hand at smothering any dissent was more than admirable.

Satisfied, Scarfz smiled to himself.

Right. One more to go.

Steeling himself, Scarfz turned towards the Master Emerald. Sure enough, Shadow was still there, facing the emerald.

The dark hedgehog didn’t even react as Scarfz approached. Not even when he cleared his throat.

“So! I suppose you’ll be wanting that handwritten thank you note after all?”

No answer.

Scarfz frowned, turning to face the other fully. “Look dude, I know you’re mad you had to help me but I’m really trying-” The wind was nearly suddenly knocked out of him as something hard collided with his chest.

Looking down, he saw it was a hard object wrapped in leather.

What the-

“What did you do?!” Shadow was suddenly in his face, snarling. Rearing back, Sonic fought for balance while holding on tight to the leather wrapped object. It felt precious.

“What? Shadow I don’t-”

“Don’t play stupid with me Sonic, what did you *do?!”* Scarfz stared at him, wide eyed. What the hell was he talking about?

Sonic held one hand up, the other clutching the gem firmly. “I have no idea what you mean.” He said. Slow and deliberate. Shadow seemed spooked, a glint in his eyes.

“Look.” A hard finger poked his chest. “Whatever you and that Fleetway did, I want no part of it. *None.* ” Turning hard on his heel, Shadow stormed off in the direction of the ship.

Scarfz stared after him, holding the parcel close to his chest. What the hell was his problem?

Star systems away, across the black expanse of space, three glowing red eyes pondered the new information presented to him. A pleased rumble emanated from him and the being pondered his options for a short moment before making a choice.

The mass of organic technology shifted, bending to the will of its head and altering the course towards what had been previously thought to be a dead planet. The Black Comet moved in perfect synchrony, a perfect collection of technology and minds working towards a common goal.

Black Doom’s face folded into a grotesque mimicry of a smile as a mind flickered into existence. Still a bit far from the absolute control of the hive mind… for now. Soon, it wouldn’t be an issue.

“Well,” his voice rumbled through the empty air, pleased. “It seems that Project Shadow was not such a failure after all.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally! We've reached the end of Chaos Barren. This fic has really

been a work of passion and love for me. What started as a simple question on a discord server quickly devolved into crazy theories as to why such and such and before we knew it we'd created the basis for Chaos Barren!

A couple of notes on the fic. Eventually, most of the initial planning process gave way to even more lore for the echidna's, individual character's (Boom gives us NO backstory on Shadow and I find that criminal), and the way their world works.
The story was born from the pockethog discord and was generally just a lot of voices throwing out all of these amazing ideas. It really didn't let me sleep.
I really fell in love with the story and despite the main arc of Chaos Barren being completed, that does mean I will be working on a sequel to this story.

Again, most of this sequel has been mapped out roughly between Fourth, Ren and I and we hope you'll find it as cool as we did. The sequel will focus mainly on the Boomverse (with some friendly visits from other blue hedgehogs) and primarily revolve around Sonic, Shadow, Fleetway and co. Oh and Doom.

Fleetway wasn't originally going to be what he became (which is the God of Chaos), but this is the direction we absolutely loved (mainly bc who doesn't love a slightly crazy and overbearing god).

We'll see lots of cool things, an old race of chaos sensitive hedgehogs, the slow return of the echidnas, and some familiar (but n/ot to them) faces.

Thanks for reading and accompanying me to the end of this, I hope to see y'all (read y'all?) in the sequel, but in the event that I don't, thanks so much for reading, leaving kudos, and/or commenting. It always means the world to me.

My tumblr is @moralitas, drop in and say hi if that's your jam!

Edit 7/19/20: Art! https://moralitas.tumblr.com/post/623825929985196032/god-of-chaos-master-of-creation-bless-us-with

Works inspired by this one

Just happen, I guess by truthmeIGOTthis

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!